

**WHERE THEN, SHALL GNOSTICISM BE FOUND? AN INTELLECTUAL AND
RECEPTION HISTORY OF GNOSTICISM IN THE WORK OF HAROLD BLOOM
AND THE SHIFT TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY**

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

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Abstract

Harold Bloom's self-professed "strong Gnostic tendencies" manifest themselves in the works that comprise this controversial literary critic's legacy. This project argues that to neglect Bloom's preoccupation with Gnosticism is to miss a profound opportunity to shift from the conception of Gnosticism as a static entity capable of study to a Gnosticism that takes the form of a methodology, or dynamic process. Bloom's early fascination with Gnosticism in the late 1970s offers a unique chance to understand Gnosticism through his most well-known theory of the anxiety of influence. Bloom's anxiety of influence offers a process of interpretation that foregrounds transgression and attempts to re-conceptualize authoritative traditions in a new light in order to draw from their authority, while attempting to reject the very principles that govern the precursor work. As such, the concept of "heresy" becomes a unique characteristic of Gnosticism, though the term "heresy" functions differently in Bloom than in the works of early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus (c. 180 CE).

This project isolates key works written by Bloom in the 1970s, subjecting them to a close reading in order to parse out how Bloom's literary theories and Gnosticism are intertwined. A reading of the Prologue in 1973's *The Anxiety of Influence*, for example, yields a striking relationship between Bloom's personal spiritual struggle, Gnosticism, and his theories of poetic anxiety and influence. What is uncovered here, however, does not seem to have been developed in the works of Gnostic scholars like Ioan Couliano and Michael Williams, both of whom offer unique facets of the reception history of Bloom in a field outside of Bloom's cherished Department of English Literature at Yale University. It is only in reading Bloom and holding this close reading up against his reception and use in Couliano and Williams that a deconstructive

‘failure’ can be perceived. This failure, fissure, opening, prompts further inquiry as to Bloom’s significance in a field not his own, and seeks to break the aporia seen in debates surrounding the viability of “Gnosticism” as a category in future studies.

Lay Summary

Since the death of Harold Bloom in October 2019 numerous obituaries, commentaries, and analyses have brought to light several controversial aspects of the late literary critic's life and career. Harold Bloom's engagement with Gnosticism, however, has not been privy to the same attentive illumination. The project unpacks what Harold Bloom calls his "strong Gnostic tendencies", isolating crucial texts published during the critic's lifetime to trace how Bloom reads Gnostic texts and Gnosticism at large. This close reading is done with an eye towards understanding how closely Bloom's literary theory is intertwined with his lifelong curiosity and perception of Gnosticism, while simultaneously answering the question of how Bloom's work on Gnosticism might be helpful in the discipline of Religious Studies, and early Christian studies in particular.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Lara-Sophie Boleslawsky. The research contained therein is unpublished, and was conducted independently by the author over the course of two years (2019-2021).

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To my grandfather, who always said I could do it – and to Tony, for not saying no.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Gnostic exegesis of Scripture is always a salutary act of textual violence, transgressive through-and-through.”¹

“I myself am an unbelieving Jew of strong Gnostic tendencies, and a literary critic by profession.”²

“I venture, after a lifetime’s meditation upon Gnosticism, the judgement that it is pragmatically *the religion of literature*.”³

What do transgression, literature, and Gnostic tendencies all hold in common, other than their shared origin as utterances by the outspoken and singular literary critic Harold Bloom?

Expressed during various points of a decades-spanning career, these quotes signal a re-appraisal of Harold Bloom as solely situated within the field of literary studies. When held closely in apposition, the above statements are inextricably linked in the imagination of America’s “most notorious literary critic”⁴ and they form a crucial, heretofore under-theorized, axis of Harold

¹ Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Continuum Publishing, 1979), 6.

² Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 48.

³ Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), xviii. Emphasis original.

⁴ Dinitia Smith, “Harold Bloom, Critic Who Championed Western Canon, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/books/harold-bloom-dead.html>; Justin Sider, “Dipping Our Knives Into Harold Bloom’s Body,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 14, 2019, accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/dipping-our-knives-into-harold-blooms-body/>.

There are also earlier formulations such as Imre Salusinszky’s, who attributes Bloom’s status as “the best known of literary critics” to Bloom’s “engaging and polemical style”. See Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society: Interviews with Jacques Derrida, Northrup Frye, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Frank Kermode, Edward Said, Barbara Johnson, Frank Letricchia, and J. Hillis Miller* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 47.

Bloom's legacy. Hulking above the discipline of literary criticism, Harold Bloom's theory of poetic "anxiety of influence", the divisive "Western canon", and his procedural ratio of "misreading" are all remnants of a career that produced over fifty books, and one work of fiction.⁵ Indeed, a small sampling of obituaries published after his death on October 14th, 2019, cite these three aforementioned ideas as foundational to understanding Bloom-the-critic.⁶ The obituaries that tend to highlight Bloom's foundational impact within the discipline of English literature and literary studies do indeed sow seeds of discontentment with the critic's elitist attitudes and controversial stance on who or what should be included in the so-called "Western canon"; and yet, scattered to the wind is Bloom's obsessive grappling with how to enact a criticism of literature in the wake of his own "strong Gnostic tendencies", and his lifelong preoccupation with Gnosticism, the apparent "religion of literature".⁷ To elide such a primal search for religious awakening in the life and times of America's "standard-bearer of western

⁵ Bloom's only foray into fiction writing took the form of *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* in 1979. Though initially enthusiastic regarding its prospects ("it reads as though Walter Pater was writing Star Wars"), by 2015, Bloom discredited his inaugural creative endeavor, stating to *Time*'s Daniel D'Addario, "If I could go around and get rid of all the surviving copies, I would." See Daniel D'Addario, "10 Questions With Harold Bloom," *Time*, April 30, 2015, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://time.com/3841452/10-questions-with-harold-bloom/>.

⁶ See Stanley Fish, "Harold Bloom's Warning to the World," *The Atlantic*, October 19, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/question-one-should-never-ask-about-work-art/600337/>; Graeme Wood, "Why Readers Resented Harold Bloom," *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/harold-bloom-read-everything/600022/>; James Wood, "Misreading Harold Bloom," *The New Yorker*, October 16, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/misreading-harold-bloom>.

⁷ Bloom, *American Religion*, 48; Bloom, *Genius*, vxiii.

civilization”⁸ provokes this author to ask, first, *where, then, shall Gnosticism be found?*⁹ As such, this question, in its broadest form, prompts further clarification based on the three quotes with which I first began.

But what *are* Bloom’s “strong Gnostic tendencies”? To begin to answer this inquiry, one might gesture to the explicit reference and integration of “Gnosticism” in all but two of Bloom’s fifty original academic monographs.¹⁰ This observation, in turn, leads to another important question, namely: Where and how does Bloom situate Gnosticism within his literary theory and how, if at all, is this received? The attempt to parse out how Gnosticism informs Bloom’s literary theory takes up the concepts so salient in the minds of those writing his obituaries, namely: misreading, the Western canon, and the anxiety of influence. To return to these ideas is by no means prodigal, rather, in so doing, I seek to emphasize their inextricability both to one another *and* to the conception of Bloomian Gnosticism. I argue, in response to the question of where Gnosticism may be found in Bloom’s works, that it is in fact the often-overlooked interpretive process, or methodology, that undergirds all of Bloom’s influential concepts. Locating Gnosticism as Bloom’s methodology in this way is predicated on reading Bloom as a critic with

⁸ Fish, “Harold Bloom’s Warning to the World.”

⁹ An interrogative borrowed from Bloom’s own question: where shall wisdom be found? The tantalizing (non)-answer is explored in Bloom’s 2004 book, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, a title that is itself also a loan-phrase from the KJV translation of Job 28:12.

¹⁰ The necessity to be so explicit regarding Bloom’s published works is due to the fact that the number of Bloom’s publications is, in its broadest output, in the number of the hundreds. Having licensed his name to Chelsea House in the early 1980s Bloom’s name adorns two series of “critical guides” to literature, including *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations*, and *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*. Bloom wrote an introduction to each and every edition.

“strong Gnostic tendencies”¹¹, whose tendencies are worked out in his creation of a methodology that underwrites his entire literary criticism. Thus, answering first what constitutes Gnostic tendencies for Bloom facilitates the answer to the question of where to locate Gnosticism as a methodology in Bloom’s work.

These interrelated inquiries form the precursor to another, and perhaps more pressing question: What does Bloom contribute to Gnostic studies moving forward? In one sense, Bloom can be cast as an interloper within the field of Religious Studies. His work in the 1990s, particularly, *The American Religion* (1992) and *Omens of Millennium* (1996) represent two works wherein Bloom sets aside the mantle of the literary, and becomes a self-designated religious critic. It is notable that these two works simultaneously facilitate the transition of Bloom as “America’s most famous literary critic” to literary pundit, whose work straddles a fine line between the intellectual designs of a conservative man of belles-lettres and visionary ramblings of an aging “mouldy fig”.¹² What is often overlooked when framing this trajectory is Bloom’s conscious decision to write for a popular audience, rather than students and academics in the field of English literature. Bloom moves into a more accessible style and checks his academic prose, though his subject-matter is still decidedly geared towards vulpine debates encircling the classrooms and poorly-lit hallways of the humanities in academia. This shift in tone does not diminish Bloom’s preoccupation with Gnosticism, and in fact, it is in *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Minds*, one of Bloom’s most accessible works, that he

¹¹ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 48.

¹² See Graham Allen and Roy Sellars (eds.), *The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), 2; Smith, “Harold Bloom, Critic Who Championed Western Canon, Dies at 89.” “Mouldy fig” is Bloom’s own term, first coined in *The Poetics of Influence* in 1988.

designates Gnosticism as “the religion of literature”¹³, cementing the foundational place of his Gnosticism methodology within his own brand of literary criticism. But it is not the task of this project to situate Bloom’s Gnosticism within the current epoch of literary post-modernism, as this has been attempted at least twice, though both of these studies could bear re-visiting in the wake of this literary giant’s death in October of 2019.¹⁴ Instead, this study seeks to answer that vital third inquiry, namely what Bloom might contribute to *Gnostic studies*, moving forward. Thus, I argue that Bloomian theory prompts a conceptual shift. Indeed, it is a shift where Gnosticism moves from an *object* of study to a methodology, a way of reading, or *misreading* if your will, that facilitates looking at texts such as those found in the Nag Hammadi library as a constellation or network, rather than textual traces of early Christian groups who may or may not have self-identified as “Gnostic”. The attempt to label these groups and the texts associated with them using the term “Gnosticism” is convenient, and yet this very expediency solicits the most strident criticism. That which is convenient agrees, as in the Latin *convenire* where the prefix *con-* meets its ambling partner *venire*, where both together signal a meeting, or an assembling, though in so doing, those who were not invited are left shifting restlessly on the other side. Thus, convenience leaves little room for complexity, ambiguity, and clashing contrasts, whose convolution denies convenience an easy and agreeable path to the generation of knowledge. This

¹³ Bloom, *Genius*, xviii.

¹⁴ Though there are other studies that take a closer look at Bloom’s literary theory, these two are the only major published works that make any mention of Gnosticism in relation to the critic. All were published prior to the critic’s death in 2019. See Alistair Hays, *The Anatomy of Bloom: Harold Bloom and the Study of Influence and Anxiety* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and see also, Allen and Sellars (eds.), *The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*.

issue persists in the field of Gnostic studies. Karen King summarizes it best in her introduction to *What is Gnosticism?*:

But what is Gnosticism? Although scholars have expended considerable effort on determining the origin and development of Gnosticism, delimiting its background and sources and defining its essence, *no consensus* had been established on any of these issues... Specialists are recognizing more and more that previous definitions of Gnosticism are inadequate *to interpret the new textual materials* without seriously distorting them.¹⁵

There is no *consensus*, leading one to question whether convenience in using the term “Gnosticism” is an advantage, or an irreconcilable debate based on the rather *inconvenient* rhetoric at play in its use. We will return to King in the final section, though there, her work on the thorny term “Gnosticism” will be read in apposition to Bloom’s Gnosticism as a methodology. The conceptual shift prompted by Bloom does not, however, mean that Bloom’s Gnosticism as methodology, nor any of his other literary theory for that matter, is without shortcomings or gaps. Nor, by that same token is this study without its limitations. To this, I enter a guilty plea, and state only that what is left open, or *fails*, in this study is a wholehearted invitation to future conversation, conversations which might move us beyond the irrevocable aporia or impasse facing the either/or rhetoric embedded in the question of whether

¹⁵ Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

“Gnosticism” is useful moving forward. It remains here in this introduction to re-iterate the three inter-related questions that frame this study, the incipient answers to which inform the three chapters that follow.

1.1 Overview

Here, within the scattered pools and eddies of Bloom’s Gnosticism do I pause a moment before going on to state my own intervention and argument in this study. I am not attempting to write as a Bloom-apologist, nor, however, do I vilify him, despite his contrite adherence to an elite canon of writers, familiarly dubbed the canon of “Dead White Men”. What is undertaken here is no biography, nor is it polemic, advocating for a wholesale use of Bloom in the sub-field of Gnostic studies; rather, what I do here might best be described as a re-articulation of Bloomian theory by situating it within the ethics and politics of the very methods proposed by those members of, to use Bloom’s rather colourful term, the School of Resentment.¹⁶ Though this may echo intellectually cacophonous to Bloom’s ears, it does so *necessarily*, in that no rigorous analysis of Bloom’s relationship to Gnosticism, nor its expansion outwards into the discipline of Religious Studies, is possible without contextualizing Bloom and his thought. As such, intellectual history becomes one of the most salient forms of uncovering Bloom’s conception of Gnosticism as a

¹⁶ The “School of Resentment” is a phrase used by Bloom throughout his career and is almost as omnipresent in his writing as Gnosticism itself. Coined in the early 1980s, Bloom’s “School of Resentment” represents a ‘catch-all’, a vague, empty vessel into which Bloom pours his own contemporaneous resentment against theories that would seek to destabilize or engage his position as a white-male tenured Professor at Yale University. As such, the “School of Resentment” variably includes (but is not limited to) “Franco-Heideggerians” (aka Derrida), Marxists (vaguely defined), and Foucault. See Harold Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 29; Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 23; and Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 4,7, 22-24, 50, 96, 491.

mode of interpretation. Informing this intellectual history is a selection of works by Bloom, chosen due to their significance as signposts in a journey that spans Bloom's entire career. Beginning in 1973, with the publication of *The Anxiety of Influence* and continuing into the final work published in Bloom's lifetime, *Possessed By Memory*, Bloom's preoccupation with Gnosticism is just as prevalent in his works as Shakespeare, the Western canon, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. And yet, Bloom's Gnosticism is, without a doubt, the most undertheorized facet of his critical imagination. The goal here is to change that.

Any fresh take on Bloomian Gnosticism, or Bloomian theory in general for that matter, should begin with a brief reminder that a theorist is by no means a static entity, and that "theories, thus, emerge to some degree from attempts to make sense of the world and our place in it."¹⁷ This prompt, taken from theorist of religion Ivan Strenski, is particularly important to think about in relation to Bloom, whose 'place in the world' was the intellectual climate of Yale's English literature department. Such a social location carried, and continues to carry, an extraordinary amount of power and privilege for the critic, whose tenure in the department began shortly after completing his doctoral studies in this self-same department in 1955. As such, throughout his life Bloom occupied a space of comfort and security and his ability to reach comfortably and indiscriminately into a field such as Gnostic studies emphasizes this very fact. However, Bloom's position of privilege at Yale does not preclude the critic's ability to alter, change, and adapt his own theories throughout the course of his career. According to Thomas Tweed, that the "theorist and the theorized are static" is one of the major presuppositions that

¹⁷ Ivan Strenski, *Understanding Theories of Religion: An Introduction, 2nd Edition* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 3.

frames many a metatheoretical study.¹⁸ Such an assessment plagues the theorizer of religion as much as it does the theorist of literature or cultural studies, and in thinking about Bloom, it is critical to remember that “theories move too.”¹⁹ Thus, in thinking about Bloom, I follow Tweed’s lead, considering Bloom’s Gnosticism and his work thereupon as dynamic and prone to adaptability and change; in short, as travel. The employment of such a spatial metaphor to think about Bloom acknowledges that there are key concepts that Bloom holds onto throughout his life, such as misreading, anxiety, and influence. And yet, these ideas are not without their own journey, sliding in and out of Bloom’s vocabulary as he refined, tapered, and crafted his very own Gnostic methodology.

The first chapter of this study follows from the inquiry as to what, exactly, Bloom’s “strong Gnostic tendencies”²⁰ are. In so doing, it simultaneously paves the way for understanding *how* Bloom conceives of Gnosticism as a methodology and how this Gnosticism might play out in Bloom’s literary criticism. Thus, I begin my analysis of Bloom’s “strong Gnostic tendencies”²¹ with the work most often cited in relation to Bloom, 1973’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, a complex invocation to Bloom’s literary theory that seemingly baffled its own author almost a decade after its initial publication.²² It is here that we first see Bloom foregrounding his

¹⁸ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 9.

²⁰ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 48.

²¹ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 48.

²² In an interview with Imre Salusinszky in 1985, Bloom admits to ‘liking’ the book, though in the same breath adds, “I haven’t read it in years, but I like the fact that even I, the last time I tried to read it, could not quite figure out what was going on in it.” See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 51.

gnostic tendencies in a published work, and foreground them he certainly does. *The Anxiety of Influence* begins with a Valentinian-inspired Prologue, a unique piece that sets the tone for what is to come. The Prologue itself becomes a set piece for understanding Bloom's concept of misreading, or the process of usurping influence from previous literary traditions or precursor poets while working out one's anxiety about doing so. The concept of misreading is embedded into Bloom's Gnosticism as a methodology, or mode of interpretation, and as such bears a closer look in order to highlight its significance moving forward.

Intellectual history heavily frames the first part of this study, wherein Bloom's early relationship to the emergent deconstructionist movement at Yale in 1979 forms a trajectory on a collision course with Bloom's publication of *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. An experimental novel, and the only work of fiction Bloom wrote in his lifetime, *The Flight to Lucifer* is a woefully inept piece of science fiction, though where it fails in divertissement, it succeeds in calcifying Bloom's own anxiety regarding the break-up and rupture of his beloved Gnosticism into diverse strains and historically-constituted distinctive movements. Thus, the year 1979 telescopes into an initial discussion of how Bloom integrates Gnosticism into his literary criticism. This first chapter thus performs a close reading, or perhaps what Bloom might deem a deep-reading, of two texts published in that same year, *Deconstruction and Criticism* and *The Flight to Lucifer*, while at the same time contextualizing those close readings, situating them within the conditions of American literary scholarship at the turn of the decade. Bloom's chapter "The Breaking of Form" in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, marks a seminal step in enshrining the

Gnostic worldview in a text that still enjoys a manifesto-like status in seminars on literary and critical theory.²³

As a corollary to Bloom's chapter in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, it is necessary to read *The Flight to Lucifer*, as this piece augments and articulates Bloom's Gnostic tendencies in order to illuminate Gnosticism as a methodology. If Bloom's chapter "The Breaking of the Forms" represents his attempt to generate Gnosticism as a methodology, then *The Flight to Lucifer* offers in turn those Gnostic tendencies; where the fictional setting of the planet Lucifer acts as Bloom's playground in which to reconcile his anxieties regarding the different cosmological systems found in diverse Gnostic texts. The novel depicts sustained violence perpetrated against groups like the Sethians and the Basilideans by the protagonist Thomas Perscors, a professor of English at an unnamed institution. Perscors thus becomes a stand-in for Bloom, whose own anxiety is displaced onto the forceful reading of Gnosticism as a singular entity, incapable of fragmentation, as the ultimate goal of *gnosis*, or knowledge holds strong enough a sway as to render all distinct sectarian divides (ancient and modern) moot. However, Bloom's *Flight to Lucifer* is not only a space in which to work out his anxieties, but also an example of the very misreading implicit in Bloom's Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation. Thus, this section serves as a node in Bloom's journey, preparing the reader for the second chapter, in which Bloom refines and adapts what he means by Gnosticism by clarifying how this 'ism' is different from the term "Gnosis" in his 1996 *Omens of Millennium*.

²³ This status is in spite of contributor Geoffrey Hartman's claim, in the very first sentence of the text, that "This is neither a polemical book nor a manifesto in the ordinary sense," See Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, vii. The reception and perception of *Deconstruction and Criticism* within English departments and critical theory remains underdeveloped, though curious, especially when brought up in conversation. Sadly, however, this reception history falls outside of the scope of this study.

The second chapter marks a transition; having located Bloom's Gnosticism in the first chapter, the discussion turns to how Bloom situates and adapts Gnosticism as a methodology in the late 1990s. Though Gnosticism forms a unique kernel of Bloom's theory of poetic "misreading" in 1996's *Omens*, one is hard-pressed to find any mention of the elusive Gnostics in later scholarship on the subject of Bloom. Scholars citing Bloom tend to pluck "misreading" out of the Bloomian apple-basket, polish it, and disregard that the very basket from which they have chosen their prize is interwoven and strengthened by Bloom's perception of Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation. Such crude and forgetful "apple-picking" is by no means limited to those scholars who produce knowledge claims within departments of English language and literature and it is also not this scholarship with which I am concerned. Rather, as emphasized in the preceding section, this is a study of Bloom that locates him within the discipline of religious studies, and more specifically, the sub-field of Gnostic scholarship. It thus becomes all the more striking to realize that the "apple-picking" process can also be found in studies on Gnosticism in the 1990s – manifestly in the Ioan Couliano's *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*²⁴ and latently in Michael Williams's *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*.²⁵ Both Williams and Couliano warrant a closer reading, as they offer 'apple-picked' Bloomian concepts, with little to no mention of

²⁴ Originally published in French in 1990 and translated into English in 1992 by H.S. Wiesner and the author. It is this translation that I will be using throughout.

²⁵ Williams's *Rethinking Gnosticism* was published in 1996. I have elected not to use scare quotes around the term "Gnosticism" throughout this study in order to protract Bloom's argument that Gnosticism is an active process of interpretation, framed *in* and *by* modern context. However, when I reference the fraught category, as Couliano and Williams do, I use "Gnosticism" in quotes. I do so to emphasize the historicity of its dispensation as a fraught category under dispute, used and articulated by early scholars such as Hans Jonas and Elaine Pagels.

Bloom's attempt to shift Gnosticism into a methodology. This 'failure' is of particular interest in relation to Williams, whose alternative typological approach to the issues plaguing the category of "Gnosticism" bears a striking similarity to Bloom's own Gnosticism as a methodology approach. Thus, it is in bringing Williams and Bloom together for the first time that each scholar underwrites the other, arguing for similar methodologies in Gnostic studies moving forward.

The shift toward alternative conceptions of Gnosticism marks a threshold as the second section melds into the third and final chapter. It is here where the experimentation begins, where Bloom is put to the test. This final section takes a closer look at a text close to Bloom's heart, the purportedly Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, and applies Bloomian misreading in order to illuminate how Gnosticism might be of use as a methodology moving forward. The attempt to read this text as Gnostic is grounded in the conception of Gnosticism as a methodology, rather than a category that defines and confines this particular text. Supplementing the Bloomian misreading is a broader discussion of how Gnosticism is wielded in Karen King's influential *What is Gnosticism?* (2003), which addresses the issues implicit in the use of the modern term "Gnosticism". King offers a decidedly post-modern approach that links back early American deconstruction²⁶, where the interrogative 'what is Gnosticism?' becomes an affirmative way to address the rhetoric of authority present in the very act of framing such a question. Beneath the act of asking such a question lie further questions, that is, questions that can and should challenge the position and epistemological assumptions that plague and shape the subject asking

²⁶ Derrida, in a 1985 interview states that "Deconstruction is interrogative, but affirmative." See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 3. See also Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics* 3, no.3 (1973): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464524>.

the initial question. Writing in her conclusion that her “purpose is preeminently ethical”²⁷, King’s *What is Gnosticism?* thus offers an ethical counterpart to Bloom’s methodology, and prompts an important movement away from the elitism and anti-historical prejudice baked into Bloomian theory.²⁸ Once again, this section is an emphatically experimental exercise, though one that is necessary given the impasse reached in debates regarding the viability of the term “Gnosticism” in current scholarship. The shift towards thinking about Gnosticism as a methodology is probationary, yes, but a trial worth pursuing, especially in the wake of a post-modern shift in reading away from irreconcilable binaries in biblical and early Christian studies.²⁹

Finally, in concluding this piece, the final moments of this project take up King’s call for ethics and rounds out the discussion of Bloom and Gnosticism with a brief discussion of the sexual harassment allegations made against the critic during his life. Though never formally convicted or professionally sanctioned, Bloom was accused of misconduct by one of his former

²⁷ King, *What is Gnosticism*, 245.

²⁸ In addition, David Brakke’s *The Gnostics*, published in 2012 offers one of the most recent takes on “Gnosticism”, a “middle ground” in the debates regarding the viability of the term moving forward. Brakke’s ‘middle ground’, suggests distinguishing between a ‘religious’ movement and a “school of thought”, the latter of which he ascribes as the best way to think about “Gnosticism”. Brakke also attempts to combat the issues plaguing the generalizing term “Gnosticism” by drawing a line between Valentinianism and what he calls the “Gnostic school”. These labelling practices are similar to Bentley Layton, Brakke’s professor at Yale. Layton in his translations and introductions to *The Gnostic Scriptures*, also attempts to avoid generalization by drawing a line between Valentinianism and what he calls “Classical Gnosticism”. These approaches, however, do not offer a long term solution to the problematics plaguing a term like “Gnosticism”, and instead provide only a temporary patch for a slowly deflating apparatus. See David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), ix-x, and Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures, A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1987), 33-36.

²⁹ For a prominent example of how the post-modern and post-structural movement informs these disciplines, see especially the volume co-authored by the Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

students, Naomi Wolf. Demonized by Bloom and the press, Wolf represents a figure who was eclipsed by the machinations of an institution that chose to back a tenured, privileged male scholar, and the startling absence of any mention of this incident in the slew of obituaries and articles published following Bloom's death is an upsetting sanitization of a legacy that can and should be scrutinized. As such, I have elected to end this piece by putting myself in the uncomfortable position of having to reconcile Bloom's work with the problematic personhood of Bloom. Whether one can separate a controversial figure from his work is an issue that maintains a firm grasp on scholarship in the wake of the #MeToo and #Time'sUp movements. As a white woman I write in in a space of privilege, but I am also devastatingly aware of the challenges presented to women who bravely speak up on behalf of wrongs perpetrated upon their bodies, as well as the silencing of their voices in a fray of masculine-dominated spaces. As such, I realize my saying that the debate regarding the separation of a troubling figure from his work is complex and cannot be addressed in the space of this conclusion might be exasperating and read as an attempt at pushing aside an issue that can and should be addressed in the here and now. I acknowledge this reading, though I also acknowledge that by foregrounding this issue in the final moments of this project, that I want it to remain as deeply and profoundly embedded in the consciousness of my readers as anything I have to say about Bloom, Gnosticism, and methodology.

Chapter 2: Misreading Heresy: The Inauguration of Gnosticism as a Mode of Interpretation in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*

It came to him in a dream; a nightmare in fact. On the eve of his birthday in 1967, Harold Bloom had “a ghastly nightmare” in which “I had this sensation that I was being suffocated by some great winged creature which was pressing down on me.”³⁰ So taken by this winged creature was Bloom that upon waking he felt the urge to conquer this *daimonic* presence in what would become the first draft of his 1973 magnum opus, *The Anxiety of Influence*.³¹ This dramatic aetiology of what is still considered Bloom's most poignant work points to an already burgeoning relationship between Bloom and the inexplicable divine. While there are no oppressive winged cherubs present in the final published text, 1973's *Anxiety of Influence* retains a hint of the somatic experience in its perplexing prologue “It Was A Great Marvel That They Were in The Father Without Knowing Him.” The title itself can be traced back to an English translation from the Valentinian tractate *The Gospel of Truth*, though the remainder of the enigmatic prologue seems to have been of Bloom's own devising.³² This strange Prologue invites

³⁰ Bloom in an interview with Imre Salusinszky 1985. For a full transcript of the interview, see Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 51.

³¹ The initial draft of *The Anxiety of Influence* was not initially titled or conceived as such; rather, what Bloom wrote in the summer of 1967 after his nightmare was a “long dithyramb called ‘The Covering Cherub, or Poetic Influnece’. It was this sustained poetic free-flowing speech that would later become 1973's *The Anxiety of Influence*. See Salusinszky, *Criticism and Society*, 51.

³² The short Prologue reads:

“After he knew that he had fallen, outwards and downwards, away from the Fullness, he tried to remember what the Fullness had been.

He did remember, but found he was silent, and could not tell the others.

He wanted to tell them that she leapt farthest forward and fell into a passion apart from his embrace.

Bloom's readers to experience a confusing descent into the recesses of the critic's esoteric imagination, as the subject 'he' in the Prologue collapses distinctions between Bloom-the-author, the poet setting out to create a lyrical masterpiece, and the Valentinian initiate into the secrets of the cosmos. As such, Bloom identifies the search for comprehension and understanding of the spiritual Fullness in Valentinian cosmology with the struggle of the poet to breach their own silence in the pursuit of a brilliantly written poem. Furthermore, the lines constituting an already blurred subject convene in the wake of Bloom's initial dream, as the 'silence' pressing down upon the ambiguous 'he' in the Prologue remarks upon Bloom's own oppressive suffocation by a divine entity. Bloom himself "tries to remember"³³ in order to fulfill his own creative endeavour, piecing together shards of an unconscious night terror in order to create a theory that will eventually become its own Fullness.

What then is the 'fullness' of Bloom's theory that snakes its way through *The Anxiety of Influence*? At its most fundamental, Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' theory can be described as "the story of intra-poetic relationships", where a poet asserts "strength" by "misreading" the works of the poet(s) who came before him.³⁴ The concept of "misreading" becomes the method

She was in great agony, and would have been swallowed up by the sweetness, had she not reached a limit, and stopped.

But the passion went on without her, and passed beyond the limit.

Sometimes he thought he was about to speak, but the silence continued.

He wanted to say: 'strengthless and female fruit'.

See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3.

³³ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 3.

³⁴ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5. Note: The masculine pronoun is used consciously here since Bloom does not include any female-identifying poets in the examples cited in throughout *The Anxiety of Influence*. Though Bloom does admit Emily Dickinson and the Bronte sisters into later conversations

for attaining the result of “strength”, where “strength” represents those poets who have asserted themselves as dominant voices within a massive English literary tradition.³⁵ Thus, to “misread” represents a culmination of both “anxiety” and “influence”. A poet, according to Bloom, cannot escape the influence of those who came before him; as such, the greatest source of inspiration to a poet also becomes the cause of a profound anxiety, as the poet seeks to usurp or move away from the grandeur of the precursor poet’s work, while also acknowledging their indebtedness to its influence. The act of misreading then embraces traces of the precursor poem and simultaneously “clears imaginative space” for the anxious poet, who must successfully evade his predecessor in order to take their place amongst those standing strong in the English literary tradition.³⁶ What this inevitably leads to is a chain of strong poetic misreadings, each predicated on an oscillating relationship between anxiety and influence, or what, for Bloom, is called the *canon*.

The dark underbelly of Bloom’s canon, however, is the premise that the literary critic, whose task is to elucidate these intra-poetic relationships, becomes the standard-bearer of judgment. Inherent in the notion of a poet’s “strength” is a value judgement as to the success of a poet’s concomitant evasion and embrace of the precursor. This judgment, exercised not by those *within* the canon, but rather those standing *outside* of it, becomes the space wherein the literary critic asserts the power and will to create criteria of their own volition and tastes. This decidedly elitist foregrounding of the critic as the gatekeeper of the Western literary canon is no issue for

regarding the Western Canon in the early 1990s, this male-privileging trend, unfortunately, is not rectified in any meaningful way throughout his career.

³⁵ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

³⁶ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

Bloom, who readily admits that literary criticism is “a purely personal activity”.³⁷ Elitism, for Bloom, is baked into the act of misreading: to be a misreader in Bloom’s sense is to “be uncommon”, making reading “a frightfully elitist activity.”³⁸

Elitism in Bloom is thus a way into the Gnostic mode of interpretation. The uncommon misreader is rendered uncommon, or rather is *elected*, through their disconnect from the very stable reality they inhabit in their daily lives. The Gnostic formulation of an ‘elect’ group who are able to parse out the true nature of the cosmos through teachings and practice is a constant refrain in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Thus, when Bloom observes that misreading is a “solitary and inward joy...an overwhelming joy...indeed a gnosticizing joy,” one begins to see the contours of what Bloom considers the landmarks of Gnosticism as an active process of interpretation *and* self-realization.³⁹ Interpretation and self-realization are two inextricable concepts that map onto the dual trajectory of Gnosticism in *The Anxiety of Influence* and beyond.

As a mode of interpretation, Gnosticism is necessarily heretical and transgressive. As “the ancestor of revisionism” heresy “tended to change received doctrine by an alteration of balances”, transforming the emphasis of a tradition by *misreading* it, by swerving away from the precursor, by usurping authoritative traditions.⁴⁰ In this sense, Gnosticism, for Bloom is the result of a proud tradition of heresy, wherein the misreading of Genesis in specific texts like *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, or *Tripartite Tractate* evade and re-

³⁷ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 49.

³⁸ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 58.

³⁹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65.

⁴⁰ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 29.

constitute these texts within a literary tradition. In this way, Bloom subverts the connotation of “heresy”; still a marker of ‘otherness’, though an ‘otherness’ signifying literary excellence that consciously rivals the authoritative source texts from which they depart. If Gnosticism represents a distinct mode of *heretical* interpretation, it is the texts produced by this very *heretical* interpretation that results in self-realization, or what Bloom calls “the gnosticizing joy.”⁴¹ Gnostic interpretive process and its result coalesce in *The Anxiety of Influence*, coming together to inform how Bloom deals with the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* in the volume’s prologue and introduction. The odd preamble in the prologue represents Bloom’s *own* misreading of Valentinian Gnosticism, wherein Bloom elects to highlight key aspects of Valentinianism that suit his own purposes in his literary theorizing. The concepts of a Fall, the ‘Fullness’, and a female principle⁴² are combined into a Prologue of Bloom’s own devising, only to be elucidated via a careful reading of the introduction. The subject of the Prologue-myth falls “outwards and downwards, away from the Fullness” and represents the poet, or misreader, who, “if he emerges from it...will be among the strong poets.”⁴³ For Bloom, the fall is the creation; a poet must move away from the authoritative ‘Fullness’ of a precursor work in order to create his own work anew.⁴⁴ Bloom’s misreading of key features inherent in Nag Hammadi texts such as *The Gospel of Truth* and *The Tripartite Tractate* inserts the critic himself into the chain of intra-poetic

⁴¹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65.

⁴² See note 3 above. See also Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 3.

⁴³ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 3, 14.

⁴⁴ The female principle in the Prologue is a reference to Sophia (or Wisdom), a common figure in Gnostic cosmologies, who, according to Bloom acts as “each strong poet’s Muse.” See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 13.

relations that constitute the Western literary canon. As such, the heretical, transgressive mode of interpretation practiced by the Gnostic authors of texts such as *The Tripartite Tractate*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and *The Apocryphon of John* becomes the model for subsequent poets whose ‘anxieties’ and receptivity to ‘influence’ culminate in a process of misreading. Additionally, misreading, situated within those very Gnostic myths it engendered, also explicates the theory of literary production through the metaphor of the fall as a mode of literary creation. *The Anxiety of Influence* is thus Bloom’s recasting of Gnosticism as an active interpretive process along the dual axes of transgressive reading and creative self-realization. Once cast, however, Bloom must prevent the fluid trajectories of his Gnosticism from seeping out of his unique mould. As such, the turn of the decade in 1979/80 sees Bloom ‘doubling’ down on the theories in *The Anxiety of Influence* in two key publications: his contribution to the influential literary critical manifesto *Deconstruction and Criticism* and his lesser-known novel *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. It is to both of these works that I now turn. This pairing of Bloom’s works is by no means arbitrary; rather it is necessary in that Bloom utilizes the both his novel and his theoretical excursus to enshrine Gnosticism as an interpretive process, rather than as a genre marker or a contestable descriptor of semi-homogenous early Christian groups.

2.1 The Flight to Yale: Gnosticism as a Mode of Interpretation in Bloom at the Turn of the Decade (1979/80)

I don't believe that I am a mystic. I do believe that I am, in my Jewish gnostic way, religious.⁴⁵

Nothing is more alien to me than deconstruction.⁴⁶

In 1985, on a cold November day in New Haven, Harold Bloom sits in his home study. But rather than furiously cobbling together another mosaic of direct-from-memory poetic quotes, or scribbling down an exposition on the merits of reading Shakespeare as the inventor of the ill-defined 'human', on this day, Harold Bloom is being invited to an interview. Bloom's house would become something of a personal *salon* in which many an interview regarding the critic's controversial and grandiose claims as to what constitutes aesthetic excellence in the field of literary studies would be conducted over the years.⁴⁷ But today, his intellectual sparring mate is Hungarian-Australian journalist Imre Salusinszky, and despite the slew of Bloomian "my dears" sprinkled throughout the interview,⁴⁸ the two are able to cover considerable ground. The interview wades through the dense undergrowth of Bloom's early career, with a large focus on Bloom's contribution to the *always already* non-manifesto *Deconstruction and Criticism*. The

⁴⁵ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65.

⁴⁶ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 68.

⁴⁷ See also, Bloom's interview with Antonio Weiss, "Harold Bloom, The Art of Criticism No.1," *The Paris Review*, May 2, 1991, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2225/the-art-of-criticism-no-1-harold-bloom>; Sam Tanenhaus, "Arts: Harold Bloom's Influence," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2011, video, 6:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHGu11GL9qw>.

⁴⁸ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 48, 66.

absence of larger publications looming on the horizon⁴⁹, Bloom's wistful contemplation of the success of 1973's *The Anxiety of Influence*, and the death of his "dear friend Paul de Man" one year prior - "the best critic and the best human being" Bloom has ever known – all coalesce in a deeply reflexive moment, a lucid example where Bloom is at his most clear.⁵⁰ The simple, direct answers provided by Bloom index a slew of Bloomian terminologies at play in the vast corpus of his work. Most notable, however, are two emergent topics, noteworthy not only for the clarity with which Bloom elucidates them, but also due to their apposition, so rarely attempted in any critical study of Bloom's legacy: deconstruction and Gnosticism.

As two sides of the same Bloomian coin, the relationship between deconstruction and Gnosticism is strikingly undertheorized in studies on and of Bloom. In what follows, I trace the trajectory of these concepts at the turn of the decade in 1979/80. While my preoccupation is firmly rooted in Bloom's conception of Gnosticism, especially as it might be developed in the discipline of Religious Studies, what has emerged after persistent close reading in Bloom is that there is no "Gnosticism" without an understanding of how Bloom integrates it into his own fraught relationship with literary deconstructionism. As I argue, Bloom is in fact re-moulding Gnosticism as an active process of interpretation, rather than as a category used to describe religious groups that is in tension with its historical antecedents. The conceptual shift from modern descriptor to active process which finds its modality in the interpretation process enacted

⁴⁹ This period in Bloom's life (1985-87 in particular) saw Bloom writing copious introductory notes for his Chelsea House Series', *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations* and *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. Bloom licensed his name to the publisher for the series in the early 1980s and as well as serving as the General Editor of the series, he also wrote introductions to every edition. There are more than 200 editions in this series to date.

⁵⁰ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 67.

upon texts (ancient and modern) is pre-figured in Bloom's intellectual output in 1979/80. Gnosticism takes centre stage in two of Bloom's texts published at this time: his chapter "The Breaking of Form" in *Deconstruction and Criticism* and his science-fiction novel *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. In what follows, I will bring these two texts into conversation with one another, effectively introducing them to one another for the very first time. That Bloom's chapter in *Deconstruction and Criticism* is much better known than his only foray into fiction has perhaps occluded any meaningful dialogue between the two; though the discussion that follows attempts to re-cast this distinction by arguing that the two texts are inseparable monuments that frame the parameters of Bloomian Gnosticism.

Never to be reconciled in the Bloomian figure of the critic, Gnosticism represents Bloom's departure *from* deconstruction, particularly that strand of deconstruction espoused by his "remote cousins" Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and the movement's 'crown' prince Jacques Derrida.⁵¹ And yet, echoing an almost de Manian rhetorical flourish, Bloom is also at his *most* deconstructive in his relationship to Gnosticism and at his most Gnostic when he is approaching his own brand of 'deconstruction' in the late 1970s. The reciprocity of this exchange belies Bloom's embrace and rejection of deconstruction, while simultaneously generating Gnosticism as a "mode of interpretation", a "critical reading" that must be "as transgressive as it is aggressive."⁵² It is this alliance that frames the way I use Bloomian theory to elucidate issues surrounding the term "Gnosticism" and gesture towards a new way of framing

⁵¹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 51.

⁵² Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6-7.

this fraught term. Before doing so, however, one must parse out how this new Bloomian Gnosticism takes shape in the era and the texts I have outlined above.

2.2 Anxiety and Influence: Bloom’s “Gnostic” Precursors and Misreading in *The Anxiety of Influence, Deconstruction and Criticism*, and *The Flight to Lucifer*

“Nothing is more alien to me than deconstruction,”⁵³ Bloom states in his interview with Salusinszky; and in reading such a statement, one might question whether there are traces of the ‘alien’ god so pertinent in Hans Jonas’s treatment of the ‘Gnostic religion’ to which Bloom is here referring. Alienation from deconstruction becomes a gnostic *modus operandi* for Bloom, whose attempt to circumvent the very movement with which he is associated takes the form of a struggle to find his own voice within the estrangement he feels from the deconstructive other. As such, one begins to see the vestiges of Bloom’s stalwart stance against his fellow ‘Yale Critics’,⁵⁴ where Gnosticism is Bloom’s unique mode of interpreting texts. Thus, to unpack how Bloom arrives at Gnosticism as an active mode of interpretation by 1980, it becomes necessary to understand Bloom’s *own* anxieties and influences. Bloom needs to be read in light of his own influential precursor, Hans Jonas, in order to illuminate how Jonas’s *The Gnostic Religion* penetrates into the recesses of Bloom’s imaginative consciousness, and in turn, how Bloom

⁵³ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 68.

⁵⁴ The term “Yale Critics” became the prominent appellation for the group of theorists represented in *Deconstruction and Criticism* in the early 1980s: Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman. Though Derrida did not self-identify as a literary critic, but rather as a philosopher (in the *broadest* sense of the term), he is often included due to the impact of his work *Of Grammatology* in English literature curricula.

integrates an emphasis on Valentinianism, the ‘alien’, and syncretism into his theory of Gnosticism as a mode of transgressive interpretation.

Jonas becomes one of Bloom’s self-proclaimed instructors in the study of Gnosticism in the early 1980s, though any reading of Jonas’s influence on Bloom must take into account the distinction Bloom makes between “Alexandrian” Christian Gnosticism and Jewish Gnosticism.⁵⁵ Key to distinguishing the two Gnostic phenomena is Bloom’s early split between Valentinianism, which he regards as representative of the former, and Kabbalah, representing the latter. Hans Jonas, whose work Bloom admits to having read and heeded as authoritative⁵⁶, should be situated alongside Bloom’s “personal mentors” Gersholm Scholem, whose influence permeates Bloom’s 1975 *Kabbalah and Criticism*, a follow-up to 1973’s *The Anxiety of Influence*.⁵⁷ What seems a clear divide in Bloom’s writing, however, is muddled in his post-publication reflections, wherein he admits,

⁵⁵ In his interview with Salusinszky, Bloom blatantly states, “Gnosticism is an Alexandrian phenomenon.” His fixation with Alexandria as the crucible from which Gnosticism emerges can be traced back to Hans Jonas as well, whose introduction “East and West in Hellenism” foregrounds Alexandria as key geographical nexus for the advent of the “gnostic principle.” See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 54. See also Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and The Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 18-26.

⁵⁶ Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 3.

⁵⁷ See Harold Bloom, *Possessed By Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 7. Bloom’s claim that Gersholm Scholem is his “personal mentor” in the study of Kabbalah and Jewish Gnosticism remains unwavering. His collection of personal essays in the final work published in his lifetime, *Possessed By Memory* dedicates an entire chapter to Scholem wherein he doubles down on the his reading of Scholem’s work in 1996’s *Omens of Millennium*. According to Jonas, Scholem became interested in Jonas’s work on Gnosticism in the mid-1930s and “had read parts of the manuscript [of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*]. See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, xxi.

But of course, to say what is Jewish or what is not Jewish is finally like saying what is Christian or what is not Christian. Every tradition is so powerfully syncretic that once you start to trace out its origins you run into all kinds of antithetical bewilderments.⁵⁸

The admission here is one that holds the key to Bloom's self-professed claims that he is in his "Jewish gnostic way, religious"⁵⁹ or that he is a "Jew with strong gnostic tendencies". Bloom revels in these kinds of vicissitudes, combining his "high" Jewish Orthodox upbringing with his undecisive oscillation between Kabbalah/Jewish Gnosticism and Valentinian/Christian Gnosticism.⁶⁰ The 'Jewish' and the 'Gnostic' pieces of Bloom's religious self are always engaged in a syncretic rereading of one another, wherein each draws from the other and from whence Bloom draws imaginative power for his theories on literature. What might be better described as a discursive relationship, is what Bloom describes as a syncretic one, and it is here that Jonas shows his precursory hand. The "powerfully syncretic"⁶¹ traditions that Bloom sees at play are modelled on Jonas's own "religious syncretism" in *The Gnostic Religion*.⁶² A slippery and often problematic term, syncretism in Jonas is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of

⁵⁸ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 53.

⁵⁹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65; Bloom, *The American Religion*, 45.

⁶⁰ Salusinsky, *Criticism in Society*, 52.

⁶¹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 53.

⁶² Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 20.

religion.⁶³ Religion, in Jonas is a means of “giving account of oneself”, echoes of which are found in Bloom’s insistence that reading is a “gnosticizing joy” where the solitary reader is brought into closer communion with their own “authentic experience” of life.⁶⁴ As such, Bloom *misreads* Jonas. More specifically, Bloom misreads a precursor, namely Jonas, by maintaining Jonas’s methodology of syncretism, while swerving away from this self-same precursor by replacing Jonas’s catch-all “religion” with “Gnosticism”. Syncretism in Jonas is never explicitly defined; the closest Jonas comes to offering any clarity regarding the specifics of the syncretic process is through comparison with the term ‘theocracy’. Theocracy, or the “mixing of gods” becomes a synecdoche for the larger process of “the intermingling of cultural ideas and values” in order to produce another new “religion and myth”.⁶⁵ For Jonas, this syncretism unfolds under what he calls the “Hellenistic era”, a period beginning with Alexander the Great’s “conquest of the East (334-323 BC)” and “which lasts roughly until the time of Christ”.⁶⁶ The Hellenistic era sees the monolithic and abstract entities of East and West united under a common Hellenistic ideology, built up and maintained via syncretism’s ability to amalgamate different religious

⁶³ For Jonas, the division of religion into specific movements or creeds “is a secondary consideration.” Religion, instead, is a concept that is “as indispensable an aspect in giving account of oneself and one’s background as is the great tradition of philosophy starting with the Greeks, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.” Jonas also admits that this puts a decidedly Western slant on religion, but does little analytical work to rectify or unpack this slant. See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, xiv. Compare Bloom, who takes a similar track, though he replaces Jonas’s ‘religion’ with the term ‘gnosticism’: “Nevertheless, it seems to me that all that all neo-Platonism and gnosticism...have in common is that they are both strong misreadings or misprisions of Plato.” See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 53.

⁶⁴ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65.

⁶⁵ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 20.

⁶⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 3, 20.

ideas, values, myths, and doctrines stemming from both Eastern and Western communities.⁶⁷ Where Jonas tends to abstract historical contexts into dichotomous, though by no means equal, geographical entities, Bloom skews towards an abnegation of history entirely. Bloom's anti-historical approach, in his mind, liberates him from the "political distinctions" that call into question the colonial Western-privileging slant in Jonas's methodology.⁶⁸ Bloom's refusal to contextualize holds firm throughout his entire career, wherein he often called those who engaged in socio-historical analysis members of the "School of Resentment."⁶⁹ In Bloom's mind, his vehement anti-historical approach negates the need to address the problematics of Jonas's methodology. How then, does Bloom's misreading of Jonas relate to Bloom's conception of Gnosticism as a necessarily heretical and transgressive mode of interpretation?

The context surrounding Bloom's first contact with Jonas begins to answer the previous question. And so, before moving into the presence of Jonas's syncretic method in both *The Flight to Lucifer* and "The Breaking of Form", I want to move back to the year 1963 and pause on Bloom's own account of how he came to read this Jewish-German philosopher's work.⁷⁰ At thirty-five years of age, Bloom "was immersed in acute melancholia,"⁷¹ described as a time wherein:

⁶⁷ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 14-20.

⁶⁸ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 55.

⁶⁹ See n.13 above.

⁷⁰ This personal account is taken from 1996's *Omens of Millennium* (see Chapter II below) and it presents an autobiographical snapshot of the critic's own devising. Whether the account is embellished or not, the critic's own emphasis on the personal status of literature and poetry thus makes it worth pursuing *as it appears* according to the author.

⁷¹ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 24.

Colours faded away, I could not read, and scarcely could look up at the sky. Teaching, my most characteristic activity, became impossible to perform. Whatever the immediate cause of my depression had been, that soon faded away in irrelevance, and I came to sense that my crisis was spiritual.⁷²

This self-professed ‘spiritual’ crisis saw Bloom soliciting the aid of psychiatrists at Yale and abroad, though in a characteristic Bloomian twist, it was the act of reading that ultimately healed the depressive critic:

What rescued me, back in 1965, was a process that began as reading and then became a kind of ‘religious’ conversion that was also an excursion into a personal literary theory.⁷³

Part of this reading-healing process is revealed to have been *The Gnostic Religion*, which “had a delayed impact” upon Bloom, who writes that it did not “kindle until I began to read endlessly in all of Emerson.”⁷⁴ The presence of Jonas in what Bloom describes as his ‘religious’ conversion also links up to the time during which many of the early passages of *The Anxiety of Influence* were written. The Gnostic creation-fall that works so prevalently in the dream-like Prologue to

⁷² Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 24-25.

⁷³ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 25.

⁷⁴ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 25.

The Anxiety of Influence sees a corollary in how Bloom reads Jonas, the latter of whom “gives a catalog of affects that accompany the Gnostic sense of *having been thrown* into this existence: forlornness, dread, homesickness, numbness, sleep, intoxication.”⁷⁵ The sense of being ‘thrown into existence’ produces an alienation that gives way to the negative affects listed by Bloom. As such, *Bloom’s misreading of Jonas* provides the critic a way through which to authorize and work through his own feelings of melancholia in the early 1960s. To see his own fall, or ‘throwing into existence’ as a necessary facet of the Gnostic creation-fall sees Bloom gazing hopefully into his own downward thrust as a means of creative endeavour. The composition of the kernels of *The Anxiety of Influence* during this time testifies to Bloom’s ingestion and integration of his own misreading of Gnosticism in Jonas. Indeed, Bloom’s sustained deference to Jonas as an authority on Gnosticism throughout his career can be traced back to the formative influence this Jewish-German scholar held over a melancholic Bloom. By framing the cure of his depression as a “religious” conversion and an “excursion into a personal literary theory”,⁷⁶ Bloom reminds himself and his readers that his “strong Gnostic tendencies” are intrinsically linked to the joy of (mis)reading. This joy manifests itself as “a solitary and inward joy. It is an overwhelming joy. It is indeed a gnosticizing joy.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 26. Emphasis original.

⁷⁶ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 25.

⁷⁷ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 65.

2.3 Bloom's Fantastic Voyage: Seth Valentinus, Transgressive Reading, and the Breaking of Forms

The figure of Jonas continues to loom large at the turn of the decade in 1979/80. This year sees the publication of Bloom's only novel, *The Flight to Lucifer* and his contribution to the volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*, where Bloom pens the first chapter, "The Breaking of Form."⁷⁸

Drawing inspiration from the syncretism he sees at play in Jonas's own interpretation of Gnosticism, Bloom misreads Jonas, transposing the syncretic quality of Gnosticism into his own writing. Bloom utilizes syncretism as a method to bring together diverse influences in order to promote his own theory, namely that Gnosticism is a "mode of interpretation", rather than a descriptive term or category for a family of early Christian movements. Jonas's influence cuts both ways, however, as Bloom also defers to Jonas as an authority on second-century Gnosticism, and even incorporates Jonas's ancient sources wholesale into the plot of his novel. As Bloom syncretizes and adapts, one might also point out that the literary critic falls prey to his own 'anxiety of influence' theory, where 'anxiety' and 'influence' can be readily mapped onto the two works to be discussed below.

⁷⁸ *Deconstruction and Criticism*, a volume comprising four essays by leading members of the so-called Yale school (Bloom, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman) and an essay by the French pro-genitor of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, was apparently Bloom's own brainchild. In his interview with Salusinszky, Bloom states: "I devised the volume, I created the volume, I thought it up, got the publisher, brought everybody together and gave the book its title, *Deconstruction and Criticism*...The title was my personal joke, which no one can ever understand: I meant that those four were deconstruction, and I was criticism." See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 68.

In “The Breaking of Form” and *The Flight To Lucifer*, Bloom’s references to Gnosticism skew heavily toward the teachings attributed to Valentinus.⁷⁹ Indeed, Bloom’s fascination with this particular strand of Gnostic texts maintains a thematic stranglehold on his novel, wherein he rather tellingly names one of his protagonists, the mystic sage-turned English professor, Seth Valentinus.⁸⁰ While the appellation itself has much to say about how Bloom reads Gnosticism as a syncretic entity, capable of elucidating his theory of poetics, it is notable that throughout the majority of the novel, the appellation Seth Valentinus is shortened to simply, Valentinus. The trope of the Valentinian ‘guide’, whose own spiritual journey is a foil to that of Thomas Perscours (also implied to be an English professor), is also a prominent feature of the introduction to 1973’s *The Anxiety of Influence*. The adoption of the Bloomian concept of ‘influence’ as the methodology for this section carries with it a dizygotic twin, namely, the affect of anxiety. In Bloomian theory, influence cannot exist without the corresponding anxiety, wherein the “battle between strong equals”, the author and the precursor(s), is played out within the former’s work.⁸¹ *The Flight to Lucifer* is this battleground, and its status as the only work of fiction Bloom ever undertook during his lifetime is telling of how fundamental a front this novel was for Bloom’s burgeoning anxieties. The space of fiction and fantasy, the acts of violence and vehemence, in this “gnovel”⁸² are where Bloom works out his anxieties, ultimately freeing himself to construct

⁷⁹ See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 3, 13-14; Harold Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1979), 7. The epigram at the beginning of the novel is a quote from Theodotus, himself thought to have been a part of the Valentinian school of “Gnostics”.

⁸⁰ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 7-9.

⁸¹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 11.

⁸² This term was coined by British literary critic Marilyn Butler in her 1980 review of *The Flight to Lucifer* (which gave the novel a relatively negative review, noting that the plot “lacks suspense, pace, and

a theory of reading that privileges Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation in *Deconstruction and Criticism*. In other words, the reciprocity between Gnosticism and deconstruction seen in “The Breaking of Form” is the culmination of Bloom’s own anxiety *and* influence.

Bloom’s *Flight to Lucifer* blasts off with a slight variation on a familiar refrain: *In the beginning was the Pleroma*.⁸³ From this point on, Bloom takes his readers on a dizzying journey through the cosmos to a planet named Lucifer.⁸⁴ The novel introduces readers to two protagonists, Thomas Perscors and Seth Valentinus, the latter of whom it is revealed has undertaken the journey to Lucifer before.⁸⁵ Both men are shuttled to Lucifer in a spacecraft owned by an Aeon named ‘Olam’, or ‘Eternity’, who seeks “a prophet” or “the true seer of the knowing called the Gnosis”.⁸⁶ Who Olam is really seeking is Seth Valentinus, as is made clear by the final passages in the novel, where Valentinus finds freedom in the Pleroma, only to return to Earth in order to continue teaching others about the mysteries on Lucifer.⁸⁷ Perscors, “a giant of a man, good-natured but easily provoked to violence” follows a different path than his friend, and ends up consumed by fire due to wounds sustained in hand-to-hand combat against the

variety”). The term, may have been familiar to Bloom, according to his colleague Geoffrey Hartman, who cited a conversation he had with Bloom regarding the review. See Marilyn Butler, “Bloom’s Gnovel” *London Review of Books*, July 3, 1980, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n13/marilyn-butler/bloom-s-gnovel>. See also, Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 91.

⁸³ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*, 4.

⁸⁴ Note, one can only get to Lucifer by crossing “the cosmos through black holes.” Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 25.

⁸⁵ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 8-10.

⁸⁶ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 4.

⁸⁷ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 240.

demiurge named Saklas.⁸⁸ Along the way, readers encounter the planet Lucifer through the eyes of Perscors, and it is during his journey that readers are introduced to Lucifer's inhabitants; bellicose communities called Mandaean, Sethian, Manichean, Marcionite, Mithraic, Arimanean, and Shaman. All of these groups are locked in a series of infinite civil wars, as the leader of the Mandaeans, Enosh, explains: "We are surrounded by the Sethians...And *they* have enemies to both sides of them, and so it goes, on to their enemies' enemies, and ever soon to the end of this world."⁸⁹ The eruption of violence amongst these groups is a common occurrence in this novel, with the protagonist Perscors often trapped in the middle of these violent episodes (though he himself is no stranger to violent outbursts of his own). As such, the fictionalized space of the battlefield becomes a metaphorical outpouring of Bloom's own anxieties regarding the splintered labelling of groups that would fall under his rubric of heretical Gnostics.

Notably, the term "Gnosticism" does not appear once throughout the entire novel,⁹⁰ an absence that becomes noticeable due to Bloom's specific naming of the sectarian groups engaged in limitless intra-planetary infighting. Though one might wonder why Bloom elects not to mention Gnosticism in a novel clearly geared towards the critic's self-professed "religious stance,"⁹¹ the absence of the term is unsurprising. *The Flight to Lucifer* is not a novel about Gnosticism – it is a gnostic *fantasy*. Bloom's decision to write a fantasy novel renders visible the phantasms of Bloom's imaginative consciousness. Bloom here is preoccupied with combining,

⁸⁸ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 10; 230-231.

⁸⁹ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 28.

⁹⁰ Though the term "Gnosis" does. See Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 5; 192. The term "Gnostic" only appears in the sub-title: "A Gnostic Fantasy".

⁹¹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 52.

harmonizing, synthesizing, a process personified in the figure of Seth Valentinus. The combination of the names “Seth” and “Valentinus” is itself a process of harmonization where Bloom merges two figures from distinct Gnostic movements in order to create a singular protagonist who is capable of navigating the conflict-ridden planet Lucifer. The “Seth” prefigures the salvific aspect of the teacher Valentinus’s journey, who upon reaching the Pleroma, decides to return to Earth in order to impart wisdom to its inhabitants. The surname “Valentinus”, by which this character is referred to throughout the majority of the novel, fuses the Sethian soteriology with the Valentinian pedagogue, onto whom Bloom perhaps projects some of his own aspirations as a tenured professor in the English literature department at Yale. In addition to personifying Bloom’s anxiety to amalgamate distinct strands of discrete Gnostic groups, Seth Valentinus serves another unique purpose as the narrative of the novel unfolds; namely, that of the Bloomian Gnostic heretic. Settling down to sleep, Valentinus hears a voice in his dream, speaking directly to him: “Heresiarch, be warned against returning to old ways...The flight to Lucifer is an impiety...”⁹² Waking up from the disgruntling nightmare, Valentinus continues to hear an “alien murmur” saying,

...Since through Ignorance came about Deficiency and Passion,
therefore the whole system springing from Ignorance is
dissolved by Knowledge.⁹³

⁹² Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 9, 75, 114. See also Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 43.

⁹³ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 9-10. Ellipsis original.

The passage, divorced from its context, seems as alien to readers as it does to Valentinus, as it is taken from an English translation of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* in Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion*.⁹⁴ While it is not outside the realm of possibility that Bloom read and borrowed from Irenaeus directly, Bloom's preservation of the sentence structure and wording, as well as Jonas's known influence on Bloom make it highly likely that Bloom uses this moment as yet another opportunity to reflect, usurp, and re-interpret the work of this German precursor. Indeed, this somnambulant episode in the novel acts as a synecdoche for what Bloom outlines in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

The synecdoche functions at two levels: first, at the level of the narrative proper. Valentinus, the 'heresiarch' is privy to the words and teaching that fuel his designation as a 'heretic' by an early Church Father like Irenaeus. The implication that the entire material universe has been created by an Ignorant creator-god gives way to the suggestion that there is another, spiritual, transcendent God, whose position is occluded by Ignorant readings of the creation account in Genesis 1-3. Taking issue with the precedent that there is more than one God and that the creation of the universe is steeped in Ignorance and deficiency, Irenaeus brands those that adhere to such teachings as "heretics". The particular strand of heretics under fire in this particular passage of *Adversus Haereses* are the Valentinians; thus, Seth Valentinus is here confronted with what are supposedly his own words. And yet, the words that are assumed to be Valentinus's own are only assumed to be so *according to Irenaeus*. And yet, Bloom is not content to allow this heresiologist to put words in his heresiarch's mouth; instead, the narrative

⁹⁴ *Adversus Haereses* I.24.4. See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 65.

continues, as Valentinus “felt a shock of memory, for it had been his own voice, and he had read or heard the formulation before.”⁹⁵ Bloom thus misreads Irenaeus, as mediated through Jonas, enabling Seth Valentinus to claim words that he did not utter in the first place, and to *reclaim* the designation of ‘heretic’.

Transgressive as it is aggressive, the dream-Valentinus speaks his mode of interpretation into existence, leaving readers, and the newly-awoken and confused Valentinus with whom they identify, to try to understand how Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation works within the narrative. On a secondary level, the passage functions as a synecdoche for Bloom’s own approach to writing the novel, as he selects his influences and misreads them in order to usurp their position and claim some of their authority. The anxieties that plague the author of *The Flight to Lucifer* are rivalled only by the slew of influencing precursors who are subject to a syncretism that would find a happy home in Jonas’s *The Gnostic Religion*. Bloom’s misreading of Irenaeus is facilitated by the quote’s presence in Jonas, and the fact that Bloom copies it wholesale from the English translation of Jonas’s *The Gnostic Religion* indicates a layered schema of influences that is brought to bear on the characters in the novel. Seth Valentinus’s reclamation of a quote attributed to him for the purposes of his own refutation indicates a subversion, as does Bloom’s own decision to perform a mediated misreading of Irenaeus via Jonas. Thus, the synecdoche functions on two levels, both of which coalesce to frame this moment in the novel as an example of ‘Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation’ at work. It is within the ludic parameters of a fantasy novel that Bloom is able to fictionalize an account of a

⁹⁵ Bloom, *The Flight to Lucifer*, 10.

‘heresiarch’ who is in all senses Bloomian, in that the figure of Seth Valentinus engages in the same form of Gnostic interpretive transgression as his intellectual progenitor.

While *The Flight to Lucifer* offers a creative space for Bloom to work out his ‘anxieties’ and ‘influences’, his chapter in *Deconstruction and Criticism* is decidedly less fantastic. Perhaps in an attempt to ease readers into the Derridean semiotic iconoclasm to come, Bloom’s chapter, “The Breaking of Form” opens the volume with an avowedly Bloomian close reading of John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. In the course of his 35-page essay, Bloom eschews ‘breaking new ground’ in the field of literary criticism, and instead states that he will “clarify what I have been trying to say about poetry and criticism in a series of books published during the last five years. By ‘clarify’ I partly mean ‘extend’...”.⁹⁶ This ‘extension’ applies not only to Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, undoubtedly the most popular in the “series of books published during the last five years,”⁹⁷ but also to the way Gnosticism functions within Bloom’s theoretical framework. At its core, “The Breaking of Form” argues that “the lustres of poetic meaning come rather from the breaking apart of form, from the shattering of a visionary gleam.”⁹⁸ This essay sees Bloom dabbling in a sort of deconstructive *ludus*, as he plays with the meaning of the word ‘form’, where “the word *form* goes back to a root meaning ‘to gleam’ or ‘to sparkle’”, thus emphasizing that for Bloom, poetic form – or that which comprises the poem proper – is linked to what he calls a “visionary gleam”.⁹⁹ The other-worldly vision acts as a

⁹⁶ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 2. He goes on to add, “My aim is not to demystify myself, which would bore others and cause me despair...”.

⁹⁷ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 2.

⁹⁸ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1.

⁹⁹ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1.

waystation for where Bloom ends up, namely that poetic ‘meaning’ has an esoteric spiritual quality, tempered and well-demonstrated by the so-called “Gnostic exegesis of Scripture”.¹⁰⁰ The fact that the meaning of a poem is wrought by its destruction, or ‘breaking apart’, overlaps with his assertion that Gnosticism, as a mode of interpretation, is “as transgressive as it must be aggressive.”¹⁰¹ The aggressive ‘break’ from form comes from a transgressive reading of a precursor or influencer, culminating Bloom’s controversial conclusion that “there are *no* texts, but only interpretations.”¹⁰² While Bloom is quick to defend this declaration from the charge of “extreme subjectivism”, there is no denying that the privileging of the interpretation in this way simultaneously privileges those who are in positions of power, and whose voices have historically contributed to the erasure of those who are not in the same financial or social circles as Bloom, a white-tenured male in the Department of English at Yale. Unqualified, the statement that there are “*no* texts, only interpretations”¹⁰³, implies that those who scream loudest can win, and often do.

Does, then, this elitist strain rippling through “The Breaking of Form”, and other works throughout Bloom’s storied career, preclude any tabulation of his Gnosticism from participating in the debates regarding the fraught term’s future? In other words, is there a kernel of usefulness beyond the elitism permeating a large part of Bloom’s own works? That the answer is a resounding yes, given what has already been stated, and what is yet to come, might initially be

¹⁰⁰ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6-7.

¹⁰² Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 7. Emphasis original.

¹⁰³ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 7.

taken by the reader as a moment of self-aggrandizement on behalf of this current author; and yet, to climb out of the fissured aporias that result from debates regarding the usefulness of “Gnosticism” as a term and/or category might very well require a Bloomian intervention, though not one that is without its qualifications and sincere commitment to historical contextualization.

As a construction of modernity, “Gnosticism” will always remain anachronistic, and as such might be wielded with more care than it has in the past. Bloom’s Gnosticism presents a shift, a move away from the static descriptor “Gnosticism” into thinking about Gnosticism as a process and a mode of interpretation¹⁰⁴ – in other words, a methodology. In so doing, the goal is not to dissuade scholars from contextualizing texts such as *The Apocryphon of John* or *The Gospel of Truth*, but rather to encourage a conceptual shift, taking into account Bloom’s work on Gnosticism in tandem with rigorous historical contextualization. To do so would take the form of thinking actively about how tropes and symbols taken from other texts, authoritative or otherwise, are actively re-imagined within a given space and time. In order to facilitate Bloom’s integration with other Gnostic scholarship, it is important to recognize how Bloom is *already* received and integrated into the works of scholars on Gnosticism such as Ioan Couliano or Michael Williams. Of particular note is Williams’s *Rethinking Gnosticism*, which calls for the complete dismantlement of the category “Gnosticism”. However, when read closely, William’s solution closely parallels Bloom’s Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation, or methodology. The movement towards Williams simultaneously calls for a transition between this era of Bloomian

¹⁰⁴ In so doing, I am trying to avoid the pitfalls of so crucially pointed out by scholar of religious ritual studies, Catherine Bell. Bell sagely warns that, “many attempts to produce a paradigm shift end up simply repackaging older problems in new jargon.” See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7. The argument outlined above is by no means a perfect or air-tight solution, but it is in these very gaps that I hope to open up a fruitful conversation regarding a debate that has become so institutionally internalized and the subject of a rather unproductive impasse.

theory to the theories present in Bloom's later works in the 1990s. Before doing so, I want to clarify that I am not advocating for the rejection of a term like "Gnosticism", nor, however, do I consider it to have any viability in its current status as a fixed category or term. The signifier "Gnosticism" is instead a dynamic process, one that oscillates between polarities of 'lesser' and 'more so' based on how a given text might be adapting or re-imagining the previous tropes into a cohesive cosmology, creation myth, or revelatory discourse. In this wake of this dynamic signified, the signifier "Gnosticism" comes to, in a phrase borrowed from Catharine Bell, "ensure that we do not forget where we [came] from."¹⁰⁵ As such, in what follows, "if this work seems so threatening...this is because it isn't simply eccentric or strange, but competent, rigorously argued, and carrying conviction."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Quote taken from a 1995 interview with Jacques Derrida.

Chapter 3: Mere Gnosticism: Disentangling Bloom’s Gnosticism from the Reception of *The Anxiety of Influence* in the Works of Ioan Couliano and Michael Williams

What began as a targeted case study of influence and anxiety in Bloom’s work now shifts towards Bloom’s own influence in the sub-field of Gnostic studies. Though Bloom might be classified as a kind of interloper in the discipline of religious studies, or what he might call “religious criticism”,¹⁰⁷ Bloom’s Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation approach nonetheless stands as a useful alternative framework moving forward. However, before addressing how Bloom might be of use in the future, it is important to isolate a particular moment in this intellectual history, to unpack how the trajectory of Bloom’s thought in the early 1970s and 80s finds its way into two major works in the final decade of the 20th century. Three texts in particular serve as the pillars for this section, each of which offers one piece of the conversation taking place between Bloom’s work and the debates concerning the value of maintaining “Gnosticism” as a heuristic category to describe a disparate and unique set of texts. For the sake of clarity, this section is organized chronologically, and will begin in 1992 with Ioan Couliano’s¹⁰⁸ *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, before moving to the year 1996, which sees the publication of Michael Williams’s pivotal work *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, as well

¹⁰⁷ See Bloom, *The American Religion*, 30-31, 37, 43-45.

¹⁰⁸ Originally from Romania, Ioan Couliano’s name is also often anglicised as Cuiianu.

as Bloom's own *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. A brief note on each of these texts in turn illuminates their overall significance, as together they weave a unique tapestry that depicts how Bloom views Gnosticism, how he is received, and what this might mean in studies of so-called Gnosticism moving forward. Couliano's *Tree of Gnosis* offers a unique insight in that it is the only work in Gnostic scholarship to date that explicitly integrates Bloom into its analysis of the ancient texts that inform "gnostic mythology".¹⁰⁹ What is striking about Couliano's approach, however, is that the Romanian-American historian of religion moulds Bloom in his own image, casting the literary critic as a 'high' structuralist, all while electing to use the literary critic's concepts of 'misreading' and 'anxiety of influence' throughout the work. Given how prominently Bloom's own conception of Gnosticism in relation to *deconstruction* informs *The Anxiety of Influence* and "The Breaking of Form", Couliano's silence on the unruly first-born of the post-structural genus opens a fissure through which the silence itself becomes an affirmative utterance of presence. It is worth deconstructing how Couliano uses Bloom in order to then understand how he does *not* use Bloom. As has been pointed out by many an American deconstructionist, "nothing, in deconstruction, succeeds like failure,"¹¹⁰ and here too, this failure is a marker of affirmative success. The 'success' here points to the authoritative rhetoric underlying Couliano's approach to "Gnosticism"¹¹¹ and how

¹⁰⁹ Ioan Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), xiv.

¹¹⁰ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 211. Quote taken from an interview between Salusinszky and J. Hillis Miller, another American deconstructive literary critic at Yale University. See also The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, 120: "To deconstruct is to identify points of failure in a system, points at which it is able to feign coherence only by excluding and forgetting that which it cannot assimilate, that which is 'other' to it."

¹¹¹ For the distinction between "Gnosticism" and Gnosticism, see note 19 above.

Bloom's work has been subject to 'cherry-picking', a fallacy that this paper is seeking to circumvent by contextualising Gnosticism in Bloom.

Following the discussion of Couliano, this section moves on to the year 1996, placing Williams's *Rethinking Gnosticism* in apposition to Bloom's *Omens of Millennium*. Where Bloom is an explicitly hulking personality in Couliano, in Williams, Bloom is a spectre, lingering at the margins of the printed word. Bloom's Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation approach overlaps considerably with Williams' 'biblical demiurgical' typology, an alternative to the category of "Gnosticism" that is introduced in the conclusion of *Rethinking Gnosticism*.¹¹² The close affinity between the two scholars's frameworks prompts one to begin rethinking Bloom, and in particular the benefits his mode of Gnosticism might have on future discourse on the fraught term's future. Finally, Bloom's own *Omens of Millennium* is read in apposition to the analysis of Couliano and Williams, both of whom 'fail' in relation to Bloom in some way. Failure here indicates a breakdown, an occlusion, a neglect, all of which culminate in an absence that is productive, in that it seeks to affirm the boundaries of these two scholars's discourse. Where Williams and Couliano draw the boundaries of their inquiries in relation to Bloom complicates the conversation between Bloom's work and their own. In *Omens of Millennium*, Bloom is himself interested in distinguishing "between Gnosis and Gnosticism, a pragmatic difference that underlies my own experiential path to mere Gnosticism."¹¹³ Seeking to clarify his own theoretical terminology and concepts, Bloom begins to separate out unique semantic differences between 'Gnosis',

¹¹² Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 265-66.

¹¹³ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 21.

‘Gnosticism’, and ‘mere Gnosticism’ and effectively builds on his work in 1979’s “The Breaking of Form”. Bloom’s *Omens of Millennium* thus stands at the threshold of where Couliano and Williams draw their boundaries around Bloom’s previous work. In bringing these three texts into conversation, it is my hope that those boundaries will begin to dissolve, gesturing towards a place for Bloom’s Gnosticism in future interdisciplinary studies.

3.1 Bloom and Couliano Sitting in a Tree: Bloom’s Influence and Misreading in *The Tree of Gnosis*

The English language edition of *Les Gnosés Dualistes d’occident* (rendered into *The Tree of Gnosis* in English) appeared in print one year after Couliano’s murder in a bathroom at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The sudden and mysterious death of Couliano warrants a closer look at how his criticism of right-wing Romanian national groups might have impacted the works leading up to his death, as well as his public break from Mircea Eliade, for whom Couliano acted as a posthumous literary executor. This investigation, however, rather unfortunately falls outside of the scope of this current project. Though one might catch traces of Eliade’s concept of ‘shamanism’ in *Omens of Millennium*,¹¹⁴ Bloom remains maddeningly opaque regarding the former’s influence in this 1996 “personal religious testimony,”¹¹⁵ electing instead to cite Couliano as a “major authority...for Christian Gnosticism”.¹¹⁶ And yet, despite Bloom’s overt ‘name-dropping’, any overt reference to Couliano is limited to this brief

¹¹⁴ See Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* (Paris: Payot Publishers, 1951), xvii. See also Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 46.

¹¹⁵ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 3.

introductory statement. What remains far more overt, however, is Couliano's citation of Bloom in *The Tree of Gnosis*, a fact that does not escape Bloom, who, venturing out of Yale's English department, dares to trespass upon the field of Religious Studies. The cover of the 1992 English translation of *The Tree of Gnosis* is stamped with Bloom's approval, front-and-centre for all to see. Praising *The Tree of Gnosis*, the literary critic states that it is "A profound study of Western religious dualism: an immensely learned chronicle of Gnosis and the varieties of Gnosticism."¹¹⁷ Cited as the "author of *The Book of J*",¹¹⁸ Bloom cements his place as an interloper in the field, as his quote sits parallel to the author's name, found in only a slightly larger font at the bottom of the cover. The book cover, thus functions as a microcosm, where the title, as a representation of the content, is sandwiched between two figures whose ideas frame the text. The eye may be drawn to the title and its accompanying visuals first, however, there is no escaping the two scholars who frame the discourse that ensues – Bloom and Couliano.

This relationship, however, works both ways. As mentioned, Bloom does not shy away from crediting Couliano as one of the "major authorities" in his 1996 *Omens of Millennium*, nor should his brief statement adorning the top of Couliano's cover be thrown out as a callous intervention in a field wherein he does not officially belong. In the midst of praising Couliano, Bloom tips his hand when he writes "an immensely learned chronicle of *Gnosis* and the *varieties*

¹¹⁷ See the cover of 1992's *The Tree of Gnosis*.

¹¹⁸ Note, Bloom was not the "author" of *The Book of J*, rather the "interpreter". *The Book of J* is not a unique academic monograph, rather a translation and commentary of purported "J" tradition in the Hebrew Bible, stitched together in a single volume. In his introductory comments, Bloom himself states that "an unknown author" composed the work, and that "Scholarship, however deeply grounded, can reach no agreement upon the dating of what I am calling the Book of J, or upon its surviving dimensions, or even upon whether it ever had an independent existence at all." See Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg (trans.), *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 9.

of *Gnosticism*.”¹¹⁹ Already, before the publication of *Omens*, Bloom is preoccupied with the distinction between “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism”, even going so far as to state that there are indeed “varieties” of so-called “Gnosticism”. Couliano, then, acts as more than a “major authority” for Bloom, he becomes a Bloomian *influence*, whose work triggers Bloom to work out the anxieties regarding the variations on Gnosticism; an anxiety, it seems, that Bloom did not successfully conquer in his earlier *The Flight to Lucifer* in 1979. Nonetheless, a brief comment made in the midst of a book review might not be the space in which to work out major anxieties regarding influence and Bloom’s *Omens of Millennium* fills that gap, offering the distinction between “Gnosis” and “mere Gnosticism” as a way out of the vicissitudes of the slippery term and category of “Gnosticism”. How Bloom works this out in the course of *Omens* will be addressed more precisely below.

It is to Couliano that I turn to now, addressing his use of Bloom in *The Tree of Gnosis* in order to fill out the contours of the two scholars’ reciprocal relationship. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, Couliano’s application and interpretation of Bloom might best be characterized as a ‘failure’, wherein it is the cherry-picked aspects of Bloom’s Gnosticism that tell us the most about how Couliano has received and built upon the literary critic’s work. Remarkably, Couliano reads Bloom as a “great observer of dualism,”¹²⁰ gesturing towards Bloom’s confession that to misread, one must transcend the common and proffer an uncommon reading in order to circumvent the influence of a precursor.¹²¹ Thus, Bloomian dualism takes the

¹¹⁹ See the cover of 1992’s *The Tree of Gnosis*, emphasis mine.

¹²⁰ Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 24.

¹²¹ See Chapter 2 above.

form of a severe juxtaposition between an elite misreader and his ‘common’ counterpart, whose reading Bloom has zero interest in pursuing any further.¹²² It is the strong reader who is graced by Bloom’s ‘great’ observation, though it is fascinating that Couliano does not seem interested in parsing out the elitist implications of Bloom’s dualism, opting instead to situate Bloom’s dualism in apposition to his own remarks on dualism as “a device serving theodicy, which is the attempt to reconcile the existence of a good Creator with the patent imperfections of the world and of human existence.”¹²³ This particularly theodicy-minded definition of dualism represents a distillation of the presence of two God-figures in many Gnostic creation myths, a trope that Couliano argues is an attempt to circumvent the paradox of evil presence in a God who is viewed as wholly benevolent.

The preoccupation with locating the source of evil leads Couliano to the Gnostics, who split the aspects of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ between two creator-figures: one spiritual, immortal, and irreproachable, the other, ignorant, corrupt, and injurious. Couliano’s approach in locating the mythology underlying Gnosticism takes what might be called a ‘high’ structuralist approach, referring back to interlocking Levi-Straussian systems of meaning that coalesce to form a coherent Gnostic mythology. Couliano himself admits this, writing,

Some may object after reading this book that it does not actually go much beyond the methodology of structuralism, in so far as its greatest achievement can be said to consist in showing that the ideas

¹²² Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 34.

¹²³ Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 23.

of different trends of dualistic Gnosis – from Gnosticism to the Cathars to the Romantic poets and the XXth-century philosophers and biologists – hold together by virtue of belonging *to the same system*, generated by similar premises.¹²⁴

Couliano's project is one of uncovering these 'same systems' and 'similar premises', in short, a universalizing project, wherein one of the most significant premises is that a text exerts an autonomous authority based on its very participation in the homogenous systems to which it belongs. This assumption is a convenient one, given that many of the texts found in the Nag Hammadi codices have no clear author from whom to trace that self-same authority.

The implicit privileging of the text in Couliano, over and against the historical context, the reader, and the perceived tradition of authorship or composition clarifies an issue also present in Bloom. The anxiety of influence assumes that there is a tradition of authors and interpreters, or a precursor and a poet, each engaged in a literary *agon* as one attempts to usurp the position of the former. In this sense, Bloom's heuristic would seem to favour the authority of the writer/author, and yet, in the absence of clear authorship, Gnostic texts for Bloom continue to follow along this trajectory, even serving as a "necessary model for any contemporary theory of influence as being a creative misunderstanding."¹²⁵ Thus, in the absence of any clear author, in Couliano's reading of Bloom it is the text that asserts authority in the system, a system

¹²⁴ Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, xi. Emphasis original.

¹²⁵ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York, Continuum, 1975), 62. This quote also appears as an epigraph at the beginning of Couliano's fourth chapter in *The Tree of Gnosis*.

generative of its own tradition based on the anxieties and influence of previous textual traditions. As such, Couliano situates Bloom in a conundrum of his own making, where a text is necessarily imbued with the most authority in the triadic struggle waged amongst the vying contenders of reader, author, and text. This underlying but significant aspect of Bloom's methodology is rather ironically clarified by Couliano's cherry-picking of Bloomian theory as a way to venture forth in his structuralist mode. Throughout *The Tree of Gnosis*, Couliano sprinkles in bits of Bloom as best suited for his argument, as in this particular laudatory moment:

It is interesting to note that a historian and theorist of literature like Harold Bloom understood better than any other scholar the generative processes of Gnosticism...Indeed, Gnosticism is Platonic hermeneutics so suspicious of tradition that it is willing to break through the borders of tradition, any tradition, including its own. Conversely, regarded through the lens of tradition, any tradition, it appears as 'misprision'.¹²⁶

Beyond the rather peculiar reference to Bloom as a 'historian', especially given Bloom's anti-historical bent throughout his work, Couliano reads Bloom in the vein of structuralist epistemology, wherein uniform traditions, or cohesive systems of symbols, tropes, and

¹²⁶ Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 125. Note, in Bloomian theory, the terms "misreading" and "misprision" represent the same phenomenon of subversive interpretation. Bloom himself was never clear on why he opted for the former in texts like *The Anxiety of Influence*, *Omens of Millennium*, and "The Breaking of Form", and the latter in texts such as *Kabbalah and Criticism*. Couliano quotes heavily from *Kabbalah* and is thus using "misprision" in lieu of "misreading".

metaphors, generate and are generated by the text as authority. In other words, the text contains within it the key to unlocking the tradition of which it is a part, all while remaining folded within that very tradition. Just as the text exerts the highest authority in Couliano's system, so too does it in Bloom. Couliano thus *misreads* Bloom into his structuralist system. The implicit misreading inherent in Couliano is ultimately one of failure, as it does not take into account Bloom's key distinction that "there are *no* texts, but only interpretations."¹²⁷ As cosily as Bloom's misreading fits into Couliano's structuralist paradigm, what Couliano's work *fails* to take into account is that for Bloom, the text may inform the tradition, but the interpretation *governs* it. For Bloom, it is the poet, the reader, the critic whose interpretation informs how a tradition is perceived and how a given work might be misread against another. Thus, the absence of any clear author that so preoccupies Couliano's analysis of "Gnosticism" does not hinder Bloom's own Gnostic method, as it is the *interpreter* that consolidates the authoritative position. Couliano, though somewhat misleading in his use and transposition of Bloomian theory in *The Tree of Gnosis*, represents a unique moment of failure, the gaps of which proffer further insight into the rhetoric of authority underwriting Bloom's Gnosticism as a methodology. Couliano, however, is not alone in his failure.

3.2 Considering Bloom Alongside Michael Williams's Biblical Demiurgical Typology

In the final years of the 20th century, the question of whether the term "Gnosticism" was a useful heuristic category to describe the now published and translated texts of the Nag Hammadi library reared its head and rested itself upon discourse in early Christian studies. A major proponent for

¹²⁷ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 7.

its dismantlement was Michael Williams, whose *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* appeared in print in 1996. Here Williams argued that the category of “Gnosticism”¹²⁸ had little-to-no future in early Christian scholarship, due to the diverse strains of thought present in numerous texts and discernable so-called Gnostic movements.¹²⁹ In very fact, fictionalized Bloomian conflicts amongst the Manichees, Sethians, Marcionites, and Mandaeans on the planet Lucifer, are echoed here, though Williams is more careful in his analysis, electing to replace Bloom’s anxious imaginary approach with a decidedly more careful historical textual analysis. By the end of *Rethinking Gnosticism*, Williams calls for the dismantlement and disuse of the category “Gnosticism”, advocating for the alternative category “biblical demiurgical”, which according to him can be “fairly clearly defined.”¹³⁰ Biblical demiurgical sources, then, would include those that “make a distinction between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being”, and whose source material for doing so “made use of Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions.”¹³¹ Williams admits that his biblical demiurgical category would admit many of the texts now called “Gnostic” because they also “happen to contain or assume some biblical demiurgical myth,”¹³² but makes clear that his new category “cuts free” the baggage surrounding the old category of

¹²⁸ See note 19 above.

¹²⁹ Williams is careful to distinguish between the term “Gnosticism” and the category “Gnosticism”, arguing that “the problem is deeper than simply the word ‘gnosticism’. It is not a mere choice of terminology but the category itself that needs rethinking and, I believe, replacement.” See Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 3, 263.

¹³⁰ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 265.

¹³¹ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 265.

¹³² Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 265.

“Gnosticism”.¹³³ The critique found in David Brakke’s review of Williams charges that Williams is simply replacing one problematic category with another, newer, shinier synonym is a useful one, though it should not obscure another facet of Williams’s argument, namely, the active methodological process inherent in his approach.

Adding to his proposal for the adoption of the category biblical demiurgical, Williams states that “the category ‘biblical demiurgical’ would certainly not involve the assumption that we are speaking of a single ‘religion’, but would rather be a simple typology for organizing several religious innovations and new religious movements.”¹³⁴ It is in this concept of typology, I argue, wherein one can see the spectre of Bloom.

Bloom makes only a brief appearance in Williams’s text, and it is only as a secondary referent in order to clarify the contours of Ioan Couliano’s *The Tree of Gnosis*. Where Bloom’s voice booms in Couliano, it is significantly muted in Williams, who even critiques Couliano for evoking the “misleading formulations” of the literary critic.¹³⁵ And yet, Williams’s typology has more in common with Bloom than the scholar might indeed have recognized. Returning to Williams’s alternative ‘biblical demiurgical’ category, what is striking about the way he outlines it is that it correlates quite well with Bloom’s active Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation approach, as outlined in “The Breaking of Form.”¹³⁶

¹³³ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 265.

¹³⁴ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 265-66.

¹³⁵ Williams’s critique of Couliano in full reads: “Culianu would have done better to avoid the misleading formulations altogether since in the end they really have no justification but are a residue of the very menu of clichés about ‘gnosticism’ that Culianu was in his own way criticizing and seeking to avoid.” See Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 57.

¹³⁶ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6-7.

Recall that for Bloom, Gnosticism is a transgressive and aggressive misreading of tropes found in authoritative texts, where the transgressive facet of this misreading is a swerve away from the tropes present in a precursor or influencing text that is deemed *heretical*.¹³⁷ Misreading here involves active interpretation of the precursor text, where tropes are re-inscribed with new meaning in order to assuage the poet/author's anxieties about the influence of their precursor. For Bloom, Gnosticism is the paradigm of the misreading process, and represents an active interpretative process that can be traced in texts such as *The Gospel of Truth* and *The Apocryphon of John*, texts that Bloom himself *misreads* and integrates into early theoretical texts such as *The Anxiety of Influence* and "The Breaking of Form." Williams's 'biblical demiurgical' typology bears a striking similarity to Bloom's formulation in that a major trope, "the distinction between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being" is influenced by precursor "Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions". In this sense, what is described as a typological process in Williams is analogous to a Bloomian *misreading*, where tropes are interpreted and re-inscribed in an attempt to differentiate a 'biblical demiurgical' text from precursor texts such as Genesis, the Gospel of John, and certain Pauline epistles. As such, Williams's attempt to replace the category "Gnosticism" with the alternatively-named 'biblical demiurgical' only pours new wine into old wineskins, as he does not clearly distinguish between 'biblical demiurgical' as a category *and* as a mode of interpretation. It is the latter that really liberates Williams from the critique that he has only provided a temporary patch on an issue that

¹³⁷ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6-7.

continues to seep into studies on so-called Gnostic texts.¹³⁸ Though not consciously invoked, Harold Bloom's Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation haunts Williams's typology and while Bloom himself is by no means a benevolent apparition, there is something distinctively useful in his proposal of Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation. Reading Bloom in apposition to Williams indicates that there is no need to shift away from the word "Gnosticism", but rather a distinct need to shift the *conceptualization* thereof. Often encased in scare quotes in order to distinguish its tentative feature as a term that is problematic, "Gnosticism" might find liberation from these syntactic confines in Bloom's Gnosticism, which as a mode of interpretation does not work as a label, a category, or a designation, but rather a procedural, active process – a way of reading, rather than an anachronistic cohesive cognomen for what are agreed upon as being distinctive early Christian movements.

3.3 Misreading Omens: Bloom's Journey to the Distinction Between Gnosis and Gnosticism

Not to be outdone, in the same year that Williams published *Rethinking Gnosticism*, Bloom's *Omens of Millennium* appeared on bookshelves all over North America. The full title of the 1996 text is worth stating, as *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* is Bloom's only academic monograph to include the term "Gnosis" in the title. A bizarre text, it is best summarized by Bloom himself when he writes, "this book, though informed by

¹³⁸ David Brakke, in his review of Williams puts it rather more poetically when he writes, "A veritable 'tree of biblical demiurgical traditions' appears as formidably overgrown as any 'tree of gnosis' cultivated by other scholars," before adding, "What is needed is pruning." See David Brakke, "Review of *Rethinking 'Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category'*," *Church History* 67, no.1 (1998): 121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3170779>.

scholarship, is not a scholarly work, but a personal religious testimony that reaches out to our common concerns as Millennium approaches.”¹³⁹ *Omens of Millennium*, “personal religious testimony”¹⁴⁰ though it may be, is also one of the only moments within Bloom’s corpus wherein the literary critic promotes what Thomas Tweed would call “a theory that [is] not only dynamic, but relational.”¹⁴¹

Though Bloom’s anxiety of influence is still readily traceable throughout the course of *Omens*, this approach seeks to counter the literary critic’s troubled preoccupation with the terms ‘Gnosis’ and ‘Gnosticism’, both of which he had previously used almost synonymously and left without clarification as to their relationship to his process of ‘Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation’.

Despite Bloom’s stubborn adherence to the Western canon, the course Bloom charts for Gnosticism in *Omens* is decidedly more fluid, arguably cementing *Omens* as one of Bloom’s most experimental and radical works. In particular, the introductory section of *Omens*, entitled, “Prelude: Self-Reliance or Mere Gnosticism” lives up to the musical metaphor that bears its namesake, as this introduction sees Bloom at his most playful, creative, and yet still firmly rooted within a tradition of anxiety and influence. In his “Prelude”, Bloom cites from a slew of precursors, misreading them into his “crucial distinction between Gnosis and Gnosticism, a pragmatic difference that underlies [his] own experiential path to mere Gnosticism.”¹⁴² The key

¹³⁹ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 2.

¹⁴¹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 6.

¹⁴² Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 21.

word here is “experiential”, which sees Bloom acknowledging that the elapsed time between this work and those studied in chapter one leads to the Tweedian supposition that “theories move too.”¹⁴³ How then, does Bloom’s Gnosticism travel? And who informs and influences Bloom’s journey in *Omens of Millennium*? The answer to these questions will begin to form a nexus from which Bloom emerges as a unique partner to the framework of typology outlined by Michael Williams. As such, the limitations of Bloom’s reception in Couliano’s *The Tree of Gnosis*, and the deconstructive failure to acknowledge what Bloom can do to expand and adapt Williams’s typology for future Gnostic studies is supplemented by Bloom’s own deconstructive failure to continue his theoretical travel in the works following *Omens of Millennium*.

As they travel through the text of *Omens*, the reader is faced with a dense amalgamation of references to Enochic literature, Catholic angelology, Eliadean shamanism, Sufisim, Kabbalah, Zoroastrianism, and the American “Gingrichian Establishment.”¹⁴⁴ The one factor uniting all of these disparate and offbeat concepts is Bloomian Gnosis, or that “which makes us free”.¹⁴⁵ Gnosis, then, is for Bloom a way of knowing, an “inward knowledge” that uplifts, redeems, and liberates, though for Bloom, all three of these processes are “at once experiential and intellectual.”¹⁴⁶ The condition that Gnosis be intellectual is no surprise given Bloom’s unflinching elitism and conservatism in regards to the Western canon, a canon

¹⁴³ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 34.

¹⁴⁵ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 235.

¹⁴⁶ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 238.

unapologetically comprised of predominantly white male authors.¹⁴⁷ Bloom's championing of his Western canon has been rooted in the literary critic's work from the conception of *The Anxiety of Influence*. This fact did not escape Bloom's early colleague, and fellow "boadestructor"¹⁴⁸ J. Hillis Miller, who, in 1986, pointed out that the authors cited as pillars of the Western canon in *The Anxiety of Influence* parallel the syllabus of authors examined in Yale's introductory English 125 course.¹⁴⁹ The English 125 figures of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Pope loom large not only in *The Anxiety of Influence*, but also in subsequent works such as *A Map of Misreading*, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, and *The Western Canon*. Hillis Miller's observation grounds the "intellectual" and "experiential" facets of Bloom's Gnosis, wherein his experience as a graduate student and tenured professor of English at Yale shapes his position as an intellectual whose pen gives way to not only *Omens*, but also the aforementioned earlier works. For Bloom, Gnosis is personal, in the same way that literary criticism must also be personal¹⁵⁰, shaped by an inward

¹⁴⁷ In relation to Bloom's literary conservatism, one of Bloom's colleagues J. Hillis Miller in an interview in 1986, remarked, "To be concrete about this, one could say that one of the really conservative things about Bloom...in his work generally, is that it's deeply rooted in the Yale English Department. His canon is the Yale English department canon." See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 219. See also Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 13, where Bloom doubles down on his canon when he remarks, "French poetry lacks not only early giants of the dimension of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, but also is devoid of any later figures whose strength could approximate Milton and Wordsworth, Whitman, and Dickinson."

¹⁴⁸ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ix.

¹⁴⁹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 219.

¹⁵⁰ See Bloom's previous remark to this effect in Salusinszky: "Since I am convinced that literary criticism is a purely personal activity, that it has the same status as lyric poetry or narrative writing, why should I care about the response to it, one way or the other?" In particular, Bloom is reflecting on the reception of *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1985, thirteen years after its release in 1973. See Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 49.

turn that seeks a “direct acquaintance of God within the self”.¹⁵¹ The figure of the inward God here represents an apotheosis of the imaginative self, the figure of “capable imagination,”¹⁵² whose artistic ability supersedes the work of those who came before him in order to cement their place in a specific tradition of texts.¹⁵³ As such, Bloom’s Gnosis in *Omens* represents yet another culmination of the critic’s anxiety, this time geared towards his own legacy in a field that “resents” the Western canon. Gnosis, for Bloom, is necessarily rooted in his own anxiety regarding the preservation of the Western canon, *as he conceives it*.

The experiential intellectualism undergirding Gnosis in *Omens* thus splinters what was a dual-pronged Gnosticism in texts like *The Anxiety of Influence*, *The Flight to Lucifer*, and “The Breaking of Form.” Where Gnosticism in these texts functioned both a mode of interpretation founded in heretical misreading, and a resulting self-realization, now, in *Omens* sees Gnosis parading forward to claim the latter function. As a self-realization, grounded in locating a God-like imaginary authority, Gnosis allows Bloom to bestow this very authority upon the work of *Omens* as well as retroject it back towards his previously published works. In a sense, Gnosis in *Omens* is worked out via Bloom’s misreading of himself, though with an eye to preserving aspects of his work that are problematic elitist and idealized generalizations.

As troublesome as Bloomian Gnosis may be, it does rather helpfully uncouple Gnosticism from the issues plaguing Bloom’s previous muddled claim that Gnosticism is both a

¹⁵¹ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 10.

¹⁵² Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 7.

¹⁵³ The “God within the self” is also a metaphor for the “self’s potential as power”, where power stems from “a knowledge of something in the self that cannot die,” and that is responsible for activating the imagination of an artist, author, poet, scholar, etc. See Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 16.

mode of interpretation *and* a form of self-realization. The distinction works to Bloom's benefit, in that Gnosticism is now fully able to function as an active process, where heretical misreading gives way to texts whose literary precursors and influences can be traced, evaluated, and even, perhaps to Bloom's own dismay, contextualized. What constitutes Gnosticism in *Omens* is "a quality of unprecedentedness" and "an atmosphere of originality that disconcerts the orthodox of any faith."¹⁵⁴ Though he replaces 1979's "transgressive" and "aggressive"¹⁵⁵, with the terms "unprecedented" and "originality", Bloom nonetheless points out that the creativity and imagination present in Gnosticism's interpretive method presents a "danger" to "dogmatic religion".¹⁵⁶ The implication here is that Gnosticism is still transgressive, in that it presents a misreading that subverts or adapts key tropes from a precursor in order to appropriate its authority. The resulting new work is original, though unprecedented, in that it swerves away from the precursor, building new meanings upon those of its predecessor. The 'danger' inherent in Gnosticism's misreading stems from the 'heretical' interpretation, or "a deliberate, strong revision of Judaism and Christianity," though Bloom falls short in his ability to parse out exactly what he means by second-century Christianity, as his aversion to historical contextualization continues in *Omens* and beyond.¹⁵⁷

As was the case in 1979's *The Flight to Lucifer*, in *Omens*, Bloom is also forced to reconcile his 'anxieties' concerning the diverse movements all categorized under the rubric of

¹⁵⁴ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 24.

¹⁵⁵ See Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 24.

¹⁵⁷ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 24.

“Gnosticism”, an essentializing tactic critiqued by Williams in *Rethinking Gnosticism*. That both *Omens* and *Rethinking Gnosticism* were published in the same year indicates that Bloom was probably not familiar with Williams’s work while writing the bulk of *Omens* in the mid-1990s, and yet, as mentioned previously, there are striking parallels between Bloom and Williams, who to borrow a term from Bloom, are plagued by a similar ‘anxiety’: both Williams and Bloom attempt to circumvent the issues plaguing “Gnosticism”. Where Williams, however, attempts to clarify the muddied waters by a recourse to in-depth textual analysis and historical contextualizing, Bloom, on the other hand, takes it upon himself to dig a deeper wellspring, tunneling deep beneath the nuances of precise historicity in order to find a purer source, and ultimately landing upon what he calls “mere Gnosticism”.¹⁵⁸ A direct allusion to C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, which Bloom admits is “one of my least favorite books”,¹⁵⁹ “mere Gnosticism” is Bloom’s attempt to liberate his Gnosticism from the sectarian divides that map out contrasts and unique emphases amongst Valentinians, Sethians, Basilideans, and Carpocratians, to name a few. Bloom’s misreading of Lewis is limited here to the appropriation of a syntactic shell, where the attributive “‘mere’ takes its original meaning of ‘pure’ or ‘unmixed’”.¹⁶⁰ As ‘pure’ or ‘unmixed’, Bloom’s Gnosticism is now able to function as an idealized process, “something ongoing”¹⁶¹, where the “quarrel between elitist intellectuals”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 22.

¹⁶⁰ Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 16.

¹⁶¹ Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 60.

¹⁶² Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*, 70.

can play out in an arena that floats outside of history, politics, and the dynamics of power and resistance that crystallize in localized contexts.

Just as I began this journey with Tweed, I would like to return to him as the coda for this section. *Omens of the Millennium* offers a glimpse into Bloom's journey, as his theories pertaining to Gnosticism develop and crystalize into clear currents, each with its own source and direction. Bloom's misreading of Lewis prompts the evocation of a pure 'mere Gnosticism' over and against the highly personal nature of Gnosis and offers yet another instance of Bloom's syncretism, as adapted and influenced by Jonas. As a bridge between what was and what is to come, this second section indicates how a *failed* reading of Bloom in Williams and Couliano opens up new crossroads upon which a new path might be trodden. Couliano's integration of Bloomian misreading showcases the potential for overlap between Bloom's literary theory and Gnostic studies, though it ultimately falls short in the ways in which it meaningfully integrates, or fails to integrate, Bloom's Gnosticism into the analysis as a whole. Williams, on the other hand, relegates Bloom to the status of a referent, an opening into the mind and work laid out by Couliano himself. It is thus all the more remarkable that Williams's proposed 'biblical demiurgical' typology fits so neatly alongside Bloom's Gnosticism as a methodology, ultimately gesturing towards a future wherein Gnosticism shifts from contested category to viable methodological process of interpretation. It is in this final section that we pluck this ripened fruit from the verdurous tree of Gnosis.

Chapter 4: Continuing the Journey: The Legacy and Application of Bloomian

Gnosticism

If there is a danger of a confusion of realms, it is a danger worth experiencing. – Geoffrey Hartman¹⁶³

Valentinus the Gnostic sage concluded his “Gospel of Truth” by telling his congregation that it did not suit him, having been in the place of rest, to say anything more. – Harold Bloom¹⁶⁴

In the final book published before his death in October of 2019, Harold Bloom asks “What is it to be ‘possessed by memory’?”¹⁶⁵ The question, posed in part to the reader and to the author himself acts as a subtle guide, leading one through the serpentine contemplations of a critic nearing the end of his life. “As I near the end of my eighties, I am aware of being in elegy season,” Bloom writes,¹⁶⁶ and *Possessed By Memory* is indeed an elegiac couplet, terminating Bloom’s career though his wistfully mournful reflections on dual aspects of the Western canon he holds so dear, as well as the Gnosticism so prominently featured throughout his work. One is, then, ‘possessed’ by the memory of Bloom’s previous work, as well as those ‘precursors’ whose influence Bloom so tellingly misread. Hans Jonas is the only Gnostic “mentor” still in play in *Possessed By Memory*’s introductory preface¹⁶⁷, though ‘mere Gnosticism’, as worked out in

¹⁶³ Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ix.

¹⁶⁴ Bloom, *Possessed By Memory*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Bloom, *Possessed By Memory*, xx.

¹⁶⁶ Bloom, *Possessed By Memory*, 3.

¹⁶⁷ Bloom, *Possessed By Memory*, xx.

Omens is still very much at play. In a moment of rare reflection regarding the fraught state of “Gnosticism” in the field of religious studies, Bloom remarks,

Everything about Gnosticism is disputable; some recent scholars wish to abrogate the term. From a literary critic’s perspective, that is not a useful view.¹⁶⁸

Bloom’s observation that everything about Gnosticism is ‘disputable’ makes an affirmative action out of the question posed by early Christian scholar Karen King in *What is Gnosticism?* in 2003. In introducing the readers to her own guiding question, namely the eponymous “what is Gnosticism?”, King remarks that “no consensus” exists regarding the origins, development, and “essence” of Gnosticism.¹⁶⁹ King goes on, asking, “Why is it so hard to define Gnosticism?”, only to answer that “the problem...is that a rhetorical term has been confused with a historical entity.”¹⁷⁰ This distinction becomes useful throughout King’s work, as she clearly delineates the differences and conflicts between an approximated lived historical reality and the modern invention of the term “Gnosticism” to “aid in defining the boundaries of normative Christianity”.¹⁷¹ However, though “no religion called Gnosticism existed in antiquity,” King reminds her readers that there are distinctive phenomena found in the writings of polemicists and

¹⁶⁸ Bloom, *Possessed By Memory*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 1.

¹⁷⁰ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 1.

¹⁷¹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 2.

in the texts comprising the Nag Hammadi library that beg the question, “If they are not Gnostic, what are they? How are we to locate them historically and interpret them?”¹⁷² King’s *What is Gnosticism?* is one of the most nuanced and useful in the treatment of the problem-child “Gnosticism”, and it is the latter question of how to locate these texts historically *and* interpret them that adds a final ethical flourish to Bloomian Gnosticism as a methodology. In a sense, Bloom and King’s approaches are hands mutually drawing each other into existence, with King’s careful historical contextualization framing Bloom’s subversive Gnostic misreading as interpretation. What remains is to read *how* this might be of use in looking at specific texts moving forward, and it is to Bloom’s favoured *The Gospel of Truth* that we now turn.

The beginning of a Bloomian approach to *The Gospel of Truth* might begin by identifying influence. The complicating factor of unreliable and anonymous authorship requires that the text and its interpretation be foregrounded, as already discussed in the second chapter. The interpretation itself might be filtered through multiple vectors, only to converge in a sustained moment of modern-day analysis. Thus, a specialist in a given field, or as Bloom would call this, a critic, must interpret what they read, whilst also considering the vast network of interpretations that governed potential authors, compilers, translators, as well as students or ancient readers of this self-same text. For *The Gospel of Truth*, a figure included in this latter category could be the early heresiologist Irenaeus, whose claim in *Adversus Haereses* that a Fall or revolt from the original Godhead resulted in the creation of the material world, is potentially informed by the teachings found in *The Gospel of Truth*.¹⁷³ Irenaeus’s reading, in turn, informs the modern

¹⁷² King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 2.

¹⁷³ See Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* 1.11.1 and *The Gospel of Truth* 17:4 – 18:11 and n.176 below.

reader, whose exposure to Irenaeus may or may not have preceded their reading of *The Gospel of Truth*. These lines of interpretation are tenuous, especially the further one ventures into the past, and yet, one can read into how these relationships inform continued *misreadings* of a text. The propensity for subversion as embedded in the act of misreading, however, is what Bloom distinguishes as a specifically Gnostic methodology.¹⁷⁴ What is equally as significant is the understanding that Gnosticism is by no means a static label, but rather a dynamic process, one that oscillates between polarities of ‘lesser’ and ‘more so’ based on how a given text might be adapting or re-imagining the previous tropes into a newly re-imagined cosmology, creation myth, or revelatory discourse.¹⁷⁵ What follows is a sampling of characteristics in *The Gospel of Truth* that might inform the way a text is transgressively read away from the texts preceding it. That these are only a beginning in the wake of the conceptual shift advocated by Bloom will hopefully prompt further study into not only *The Gospel of Truth*, but others that have traditionally been labelled “Gnostic”.

The Gospel of Truth opens with the phrase “the good news of truth is a joy” before going on to explicate that this ‘gnosticizing’ joy is present for those who have knowledge of the Father through “the power of the Word”.¹⁷⁶ The Coptic *πενταγγελιον*, rendered in Smith’s translation as “good news” rather than “gospel” might be read as just such a subversive misreading, given its prominent position at the beginning of this so-called gospel. In relation to the semi-authoritative

¹⁷⁴ See Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 6-7.

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter 1 above.

¹⁷⁶ Gospel of Truth 16:31,34. Coptic text and translation taken from Geoffrey Smith, *Valentinian Christianity: Texts and Translations* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2020), 326.

synoptic gospels, the gospel of truth presents little information about the life and teachings of Jesus, electing instead to focus on the more anonymous dyad of Father and Son. As such, the ‘good news’ here is rendered into an exposition on the structures of the cosmos, emphasizing the ineffability of the Son due to the rebellion and “forgetfulness of Error”.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, it is relatively difficult to trace any distinctive narrative arc in *The Gospel of Truth*, so unlike the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that tend to follow along from the early days of Jesus’s ministry up to his resurrection, structuring his teachings around clusters of events therein. As such, to access the “good news” is to wade through disparate sections, moving from primordial creation myth, to cosmology, to references to the death and resurrection of Christ, to numerous parables, all of which are stitched together under the auspices of this esoteric gospel. Thus, rather than foreground a narrative, this ΠΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ occludes the easy transition from beginning, middle, and end, as any passage of the gospel is subject to a re-imagination of its part to a complete whole. What makes such an enterprise Gnosticism, according to Bloom, would be its transgressive misreading *as well as* its promotion of the individual to a position wherein the experience of ‘joy’ and enlightenment stems from their own experience interpreting the text. *The Gospel of Truth* offers little to no account of plural subjects; there are few mentions made of the community or group, placing the onus of experience upon the individual subject whose interpretation of the text is scaffolded by readings upon readings that form palimpsestic layers as the text is read throughout history. It is these that the modern day scholar of Gnosticism must contend with in their own treatment of these ancient texts, and it is with a careful understanding of each subsequent context that any Bloomian methodology should proceed.

¹⁷⁷ Gospel of Truth 17:37

Gnosticism as a methodology might best be summarized as a dynamic process of interpretation, informed by a misreading perpetuated and sustained in a text. This is a slippery slope, as one might point out that an interpretation is always already attempting to liberate itself from the confines of the very interpretation that brought it to bear. As such, Bloom's emphasis that there are "no texts, only interpretations" is an uncomfortable reality, as these interpretations are never the stable entities we want them to be. But that, perhaps, is the very nature of the many-headed beast that informs Gnosticism's network of unique and eccentric texts. This, then, is why Gnosticism, as a static object of study only limits where a Gnosticism as methodology opens, enriches, and adapts.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This project has sought to locate Gnosticism in Bloom's work, to identify how that Gnosticism has been received within the subfield of early Christian studies, and, most importantly, to prompt future scholars towards a conception of Gnosticism that moves away from static category and into a procedural, dynamic methodology. As such, in concluding, I want to clearly outline five major points that indicate what this project has set out to do and why Bloomian theory might be important moving forward. In summarizing these five points, it is my hope that the careful reader might use the 'failures' found in this project in order to open up new avenues of inquiry based upon the work laid out herein:

- First, Bloomian literary theory *cannot* be disassociated from Bloom's lifelong preoccupation and conception of Gnosticism. The most cited text in Bloom's corpus, *The Anxiety of Influence* carefully integrates the Gnostic Creation-Fall into its opening pages for a reason, namely to indicate that Bloom falls squarely within his own anxiety of influence. Texts such as *The Flight to Lucifer* and "The Breaking of Form" demonstrate Bloom's own transgressive reading of precursors such as Hans Jonas and the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*. Bloom's "strong Gnostic tendencies" are thus laid out in his attempt to use Gnosticism as a transgressive mode of interpretation whilst composing his own theories and texts.¹⁷⁸ Any study of Bloomian theory, whether located in a department of English literature, Religious Studies, or any other discipline should not neglect a facet of Bloom that, until now, has been strikingly undertheorized.

¹⁷⁸ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 48.

- Second, Bloomian theory is by no means limited to the field of literary studies, as is indicated in the brief reception history laid out in Chapter 3. Whether explicit, as in Couliano, or implicit, as in Williams, Bloom offers a unique parallel to the work already being done in the sub-field of Gnostic studies. Couliano and Williams, however, in cherry-picking from Bloom, tend to disregard the strong inter-relationship between Bloom's theory and his Gnosticism, and as such, Bloom, in their work, is simply a means to an end. What has been demonstrated in a close reading of the 'failures' in Williams's and Couliano's use of Bloom, has opened up a parallel track that indicates that Bloom *is* of use in future Gnostic studies, though in so doing, one must revisit Bloom's own work carefully, and take into account the analysis brought to bear in Chapter 1 and the first point directly above.
- Bloomian Gnosticism is by no means a wholesale or perfect solution to the issues arising from the inadequacy of a term or category of "Gnosticism". In fact, the use of Bloomian theory *requires* that the ancient texts under survey are accompanied by rigorous historical contextualization. Doing so does not erase the help that Bloomian theory might provide, but rather ensures that the anti-historical conjecture, used by Bloom to perpetuate a certain kind of literary critical elitism is circumvented. To do so is not to engage in the same level of cherry-picking as Couliano and Williams, as Bloom himself must *also* be contextualized, as has been my intent in both Chapters 2 and 3.
- Bloom's Gnosticism opens the door for thinking differently about Gnosticism. What Bloom prompts is a consideration of Gnosticism as a system of active procedures, or methodology. Rather than a static object of study, Bloom offers a way forward in thinking about Gnosticism as a system of interpretation, that is necessarily 'heretical',

claiming its ‘heretical’ status in part due to its transgressive nature of reading and subverting authoritative traditions. To shift one’s perception of Gnosticism in this way leads to the final, and perhaps most significant point of interest.

- That, finally, Gnosticism does not need to follow alongside an either/or trajectory. That there is no need to point one’s finger and say that this or that is or is not definitively Gnosticism may seem self-evident. And yet, often the observation that something is not a static either/or tends to open up a vacancy that speaks to the uncomfortable truth that complexity is difficult to pin down – whether in writing or in the classroom. While Bloom’s theory is not without its gaps, imperfections, and shortcomings, the Bloomian shift towards reading Gnosticism dynamically offers a potential first step into the void, despite the anxieties lurking within.

5.1 Afterward, or Bloom Agonistes: Wrestling with A Fraught Legacy

To these dark steps is lent a guiding hand.¹⁷⁹ But what happens when the guiding hand tempts one further into the darkness, and away from a clear, candescent light? Harold Bloom is one such guiding hand, whose legacy prompts a careful consideration of the voices silenced in the course of an almost seven-decade long career. As such, this conclusion will take a slight detour from the variables of Gnosticism in order to think about the ethics of using a figure like Bloom, whose legacy is by no means unblemished. Echoing King¹⁸⁰, thinking about ethics or, the moral

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Milton, “Samson Agonistes”, line 1.

¹⁸⁰ See the discussion in King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 239-245.

preoccupations and assumptions underlying the use of Bloomian theory, will round out a project premised on opening a dialogue regarding the future use of Bloom, the concept of Gnosticism, and the positionality of the interpreter (Bloomian or otherwise).

In a 2004 cover story for *New York Magazine*, author and journalist Naomi Wolf detailed a disturbing account of an evening during which her then professor Harold Bloom made unwanted sexual advances towards her in her own home.¹⁸¹ Subsequent to the article's publication, Wolf was demonized by journalists, Bloom's former students, and even Bloom himself, who only remarked, "I refuse to even use the name of this person. I call her Dracula's Daughter."¹⁸² Beyond the fact that Bloom's comment makes reference to an equally problematic scenario – Bela Lugosi, the actor who played 'Daddy' Dracula was himself no stranger to misconduct in his multiple marriages to younger women – Bloom's comment and the barrage of criticisms against Wolf¹⁸³ demonstrates a rhetoric of authority primed to silence the voices of

¹⁸¹ Naomi Wolf, "The Silent Treatment", *New York Magazine*, February 20, 2004, accessed March 30, 2019, https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/n_9932/.

¹⁸² Bloom in an interview with TIME Magazine's Daniel D'Addario. See also the article published by Meghan O'Rourke in *Slate* in 2004, following the publication of Wolf's "The Silent Treatment". O'Rourke's article, entitled "Crying Wolf" rebutted Wolf's claim that institutions like Yale made it difficult, if not impossible to file claims against tenured professors for sexual harassment, writing, "What it seems she really wants from Yale is for its administration to bend over backward for her now that she's come forward, and thus prove that it really, really cares about its students." See also Camille Paglia, whose article in the *New York Observer* seemingly sought to defend Bloom on the basis of his age: "I just feel it's indecent that if Naomi Wolf did not have the courage to pursue the matter at the time, then to bring all of this down on a man who is in his seventies and has health problems, to drag him into a 'he said, she said' scenario so late in the game, to me demonstrates a lack of proportion and a basic sense of fair play."

¹⁸³ Paglia perhaps went furthest in her attacks against Wolf, blaming the survivor for 'alluring' professors with her appearance: "Naomi Wolf, for her entire life, has been batting her eyes and bobbing her boobs and made a profession out of courting male attention by flirting and offering her sexual allure." See Lloyd Grove and Elisa Lipsky-Karasz, "Howling Over Wolf Exposé," *New York Daily News*, February 19, 2004, accessed March 14 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/archives/gossip/howling-wolf-expose-article-1.617891>.

women who have survived sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault in a professional setting. It is this rhetoric, however, and the complex issue of reading, analyzing, and critiquing the legacy of a figure like Bloom where I want to end, rather than by ascertaining the validity of whether Bloom did or did not engage in sexual misconduct. The question at play here is whether or not a figure can be separated from his work, and *how* this process can move forward without further perpetuating the censorship and silencing of voices that are already marginalized in an academic setting. In a moment of personal introspection, to read Wolf's story is cause to pause and reflect. Though I am a witness to her words, I have chosen to write an entire thesis on Bloomian theory. Wolf's own fraught legacy, particularly in the wake of her comments against vaccinations, complicates the situation all the more. However, despite the further necessity to question and think critically about Wolf's recent remarks, this is a project based on Bloom, and as such, his position of power merits this moment of reflection upon the ethics of writing about a figure who was indeed accused of misconduct.

This conflict is by no means one I face alone, as the numerous conversations shared with fellow female scholars sees many of us facing a similar plight, with no concrete way forward as of yet. However, in saying so, I want to extend an invitation to *all* of my colleagues to think about how one reconciles the work we do with our own personal convictions, and in so doing, considering the ethical implications of our methodological interventions, however incomplete or uncomfortable they might initially be.

That in a survey of almost 30 obituaries published in the wake of Bloom's death in October 2019, only two have made mention of Wolf's and the allegations against the literary

critic only exacerbates the frustration felt in thinking critically about Bloom's legacy.¹⁸⁴ At the beginning of this project, I stated that the number of obituaries featuring any mention of Bloom's 'Gnostic tendencies' were scarce, and it is perturbing to realize that the small number of post-mortem articles featuring any mention of Gnosticism almost outweigh those mentioning Bloom's misconduct allegations.¹⁸⁵ I have also mentioned that Bloom's Gnosticism as a methodology is probationary, and in so doing I now lean in to the *probatio* underwriting this term, testing not only the textual scope of this novel conceptual shift, but also its limitations given its fraught history as an artifact buried and recovered from the mind of a controversial figure. Bloomian theory may or may not claim *noli me tangere*, but Bloom himself is no martyr, nor does his legacy forge on, unblemished.

¹⁸⁴ The first was a piece published on the 14th of October in *Jezebel* by Lauren Evans, "A Look Back at How the Media Demonized Naomi Wolf for Accusing Harold Bloom of Sexual Assault," *Jezebel*, October 14, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://jezebel.com/a-look-back-at-how-the-media-demonized-naomi-wolf-for-a-1839046051>.

The second was penned by Julia Yost in December that same year. See Julia Yost, "America's Fat White Knight," *First Things*, December 14, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/12/americas-fat-knight>. I do not condone the language that implicitly leans towards body-shaming due to one's weight.

¹⁸⁵ See note 4 above.

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